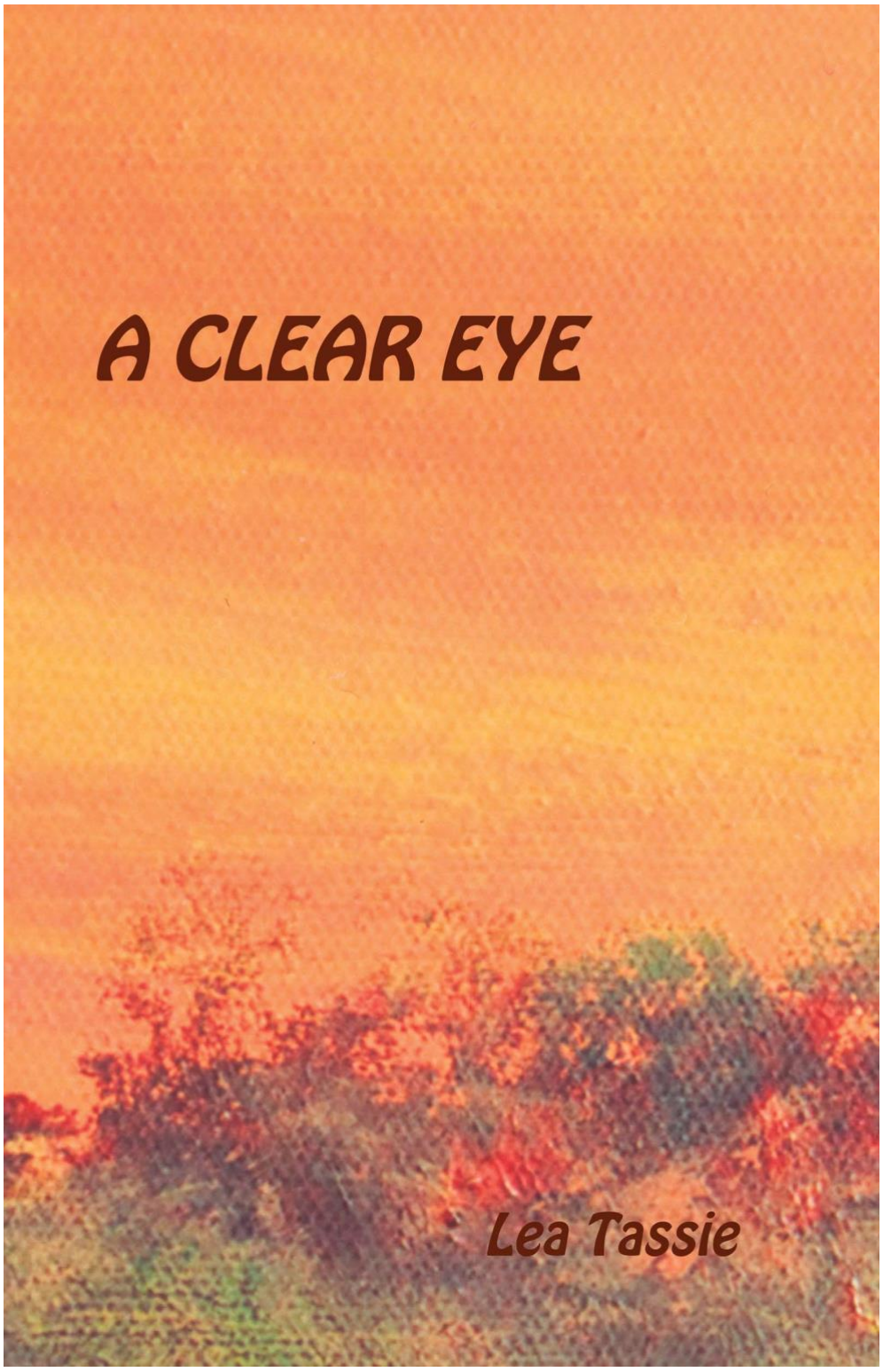
A CLEAR EYE
Lea Tassie

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by

Lea Tassie

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For Muriel and Jim

Rather than love, than money, than fame,
give me truth.

Henry David Thoreau

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Prologue - July 1970

Callie McKenzie drives the truck into the yard and parks behind the small farmhouse, still sitting foursquare on its log foundation. It looks neglected and shrunken, windows bare, white paint faded. It's been empty for a long time; the voices that once filled the rooms gone forever.

She can still hear Lewis's croaking legacy to her six years ago, only hours before he died. "The farm's yours when your mother goes. If you want it." She'd wanted it at twelve. Does she want it now? Can she bear to give up this link to the valley she'd loved with such fierce passion?

Callie brushes away the tears on her cheeks. The early morning air had been cool when she left town but now the sun beats down on the cab roof. Fresh sweat bleeds into the plaid wool shirt and jeans she'd worn to fly down from Barrow in northern Alaska two days ago. She climbs out of the pickup and breathes in the scent of earth and green growth, the spice of spruce and jack pine in the remains of the wood pile. Grasshoppers chirr in the lush grass; swallows soar and dive through the blue air.

Yesterday she'd sat through her mother's memorial service, nails biting into her palms. Father Penrose, black hair streaked with silver, had blathered on and on about Lillian being a wonderful woman and how much her children would miss her. Russell and Peter might miss her, but she won't. The war between them left too much bitterness on both sides.

Young wheat shimmers green in the field across the creek. Behind her, the grass on the pasture hills is long, no cattle now to keep it shorn. To her right, barn and chicken house stand empty and desolate. To her left, across the spring, the garden is overgrown with foxtail and pigweed. She imagines Lewis in the barn, milking Rosie, hens gossiping in the yard, rows of potatoes in the garden. The tears start again.

Should she come back and live here, take care of the land as she'd once longed to do? It seems unfair to Russell, who's worked the land these last six years. And surely Peter should have his share.

Callie unlocks the back door, then turns the shiny key over in her hand. The lock is something new. So is the paved road running past the house, then west across the valley and over the jack pine ridge to the Alaska Highway. So are the farms and gas wells littering the valley, alien presences.

When she was growing up, no one lived here except the McKenzies, the nearest neighbor seven miles away. No phone, no power, no school, no way of getting out in the winter. No running water, no friends, no movies. Too much work and too little money. But the isolated, silent valley had been companion, teacher, and sweet solace.

Her hiking boots thud on the worn linoleum floor.

"Callie, don't wear those filthy boots in here!" Lillian's voice echoes in her head.

Callie climbs into the attic's stale heat and looks out the south window. She knows every inch of the half section and the creek that runs through it. She could walk here again, listen to the birds and the creek sing, look for buttercups. Do wolves still howl on the jack pine ridge in winter? Probably not. Too many people, too much traffic.

She'd have to work hard. But it would be a simple life: earth, air, sunlight, and water nourishing the plants and her soul. She'd have her own land under her feet.

A fly bounces and buzzes against the glass. She opens the window, and it zooms out, down toward the spring, free, going about its business.

She has to fly back to the Arctic tomorrow. There's only this one day to think about the valley, about the farm. To make her decision. Not nearly long enough, the way her days fly by. Time seemed to move much more slowly the year she turned twelve, the year everything changed.

Herron Valley – Late Winter 1947

Chapter One

Callie struggles up the hill, thin body bulky in snow pants and parka, deep snow dragging at her legs. She flings herself onto a windswept rock ledge above the creek mouth and squints against sunlight striking cold, brilliant sparks on the crusted snow. Behind her, chickadees sing in a grove of skeletal poplars and below, to the left, the glittering, frozen lake curves away to the southeast.

She takes off her mitts and holds between warm hands the icy silver trunk of a young cottonwood beside the ledge. The poor tree is frozen, yet lives; it will make leaves and grow taller when warm weather comes. It's amazing how plants seem able to endure almost anything. The hard, ripe wheat kernels in her father's granary survive the cold, yet green wheat dies if it freezes. Perhaps because green wheat is full of moisture, though water under the creek ice doesn't freeze. But then, it's always on the move.

Soon be time for her to move, too; the chill of frigid rock is penetrating through the wool pants to her flesh. Not that it matters. Being cold is nothing.

Yesterday Lillian screamed her into a corner, so angry her tongue seemed to spit flame. Callie had cowered, shaking, her own tongue frozen. Her mother is calmer today but there's no knowing when she'll erupt again.

Callie tucks her blonde braids inside the parka hood and breathes in the silence of Herron Valley. A week ago, a late February chinook had melted six inches of snow, raising restless urges in seed, root, and sap. Next day fresh Arctic winds crisped the melt to a thin crust, leaving the sun-seeking life nothing but mere shadowy dreams of spring.

A mile west, the valley slopes up to a ridge crowned with jack pine, spruce, and poplar, where timber wolves sing in deep winter. Beyond are the Rockies, too far away to see, and she has to imagine snowbound granite peaks, barren and ferocious. Above the valley floor a hawk coasts, scanning the snow for mice.

The snow-drowned creek, marked by bare willows, snakes north through the half-buried, barbed wire fences of her father's farm. The buildings are hidden behind a hill jutting out from the valley's eastern wall and it's easy to pretend the buildings and people aren't there, that the empty land is all hers.

Movement catches her eye. "Jake! What are you doing?"

The collie is digging beside the creek, ears forward, fur spattered with snow, tail wagging. She slips and slides down the slope to see what he's found.

It's the tip of an antler. She tugs, freeing it from tangled dead grass beneath the snow. It seems too big for a deer, so it might be elk.

Kneeling beside Jake, she uses her hands to dig up leg bones. If they're elk, Lewis will want all of them.

The snow dims to dull mica flashes and she looks up to see thin white clouds covering the blue sky in the ripples that Lewis calls a mackerel sky. The ripples are all the same, like furrows in a plowed field, not nearly as good for sky dreams as the heaped meringue of cumulus clouds.

With a start, she realizes the sun has moved some distance across the sky. She'd promised to take Jake for a quick walk and come right home. Now Lillian will blow up

again. Her flesh shrinks inside the parka.

She picks up the antler. "Come on, Jake."

The collie trots ahead along their trail, then stops to mark a willow with his scent, his pee turning to pale yellow ice crystals. Crystal is a beautiful word. It sounds exactly like the shattering of the thin milk-white ice that forms over a puddle in the first frosts of fall.

The sky is clearing again. If the wind doesn't blow all the clouds away, sunset could bring cloud fire, peach, mauve and burning gold above the dull, dusky green of the firs, giving the snow a glow that seems almost warm.

She makes several side trips up the hill to look for leaf buds on the poplars. On the last one, she snaps off a branch to take home and put in water. The warmth of the house should make the buds appear, make them grow faster.

When she tops the rise at the south end of the half-acre vegetable garden, another hour has passed. She leans on the corner fence post and tries to armor herself against Lillian's anger.

The house, a small, white, frame box with a red roof, crouches beside the dirt road a few yards beyond the north end of the garden, separated from it by a shallow gully that carries water from the spring down to the creek. When they homesteaded here in 1943, Lewis laid a twenty-four by twenty-four foot floor which looked too small for a kitchen, front room and two bedrooms. It's far too small when Lillian's on a rampage. Is she on one now? Two bedroom windows, and the attic window above, form an upside-down blank face, which gives no answer.

The yard lies in a saucer of land backed on three sides by hills, the western lip broken off where the land slopes down to the creek. At the far side of the saucer is the mansard-roofed barn and a chicken shed, their unpainted wood weathered to the color of faded brown grass. There's no sign of her father but he might be in the workshop, which sits beside the head of the spring just below the eastern pasture hills. Or in the house, if he's finished his chores.

Boots crunching frozen snow, she tramps past the garden, across the gully and through the small wooden gate. Inside the shed on the north side of the house, she drops the antler and poplar branch on the work bench, takes off her parka, and tries to visualize Lillian in a summer mood.

It's not easy. Her mother has a smooth round face, short, graying, brown hair, and pale blue eyes that twinkle when she laughs. But she rarely laughs. She's mad most of the time, her mouth turned down in an ugly curve.

Lillian appears in the kitchen doorway. "I told you to come right home. Get in here and peel some potatoes."

Callie flinches. Lillian's voice is high, her English accent sharp, so she's really on the warpath. Her hair is wound on metal rollers and her short, plump figure strains at the seams of a wartime striped cotton house dress that barely reaches her knees. Beige lisle stockings end in two small wrinkles above tie oxfords.

As Lillian moves away, her glance grazes the antler and fastens on Callie. "Don't bring that filthy old thing into my house! Take it away or I'll throw it in the fire."

"I brought it for Dad. It's not hurting anything."

"Don't you dare talk back to me!" Lillian's face is flushed, her eyes blue-shadowed snow. "Get rid of it."

Callie, head bent, puts her parka back on and takes the antler to Lewis's sanctuary, a

small lean-to on the side of his workshop. He's in there, looking at a partly assembled skeleton in the light from one tiny window. "Dad, here's an antler. Is it elk?"

He turns toward her, a tall, spare figure in faded denim overalls, red plaid shirt and jacket, a battered felt hat pulled low over his eyes. She hands him the antler, then looks at an old calendar picture tacked to the rough wall. A majestic bull elk with massive antlers, his head held high, stands on a ridge, snow-capped mountains behind him. He looks strong and free, as though he could go anywhere and do anything he likes.

"It's from an elk all right," Lewis says. He has a deep voice, calm and soothing, though Lillian complains that he talks flat Canadian. He bends and places the antler in position beside the skull.

"Jake and I dug up a whole pile of bones." When she asked him why he was building a skeleton, all he'd say was, 'to prove I can.' There must be more to it than that, or Lillian wouldn't get so mad.

"We'll go get them in a day or two." He's frowning now, his eyes dark under the shadow of his hat. "Your mother's pretty upset. She says you told a lie."

"I didn't!" The accusation is a swift knife thrust, jarring her whole body, bringing tears to her eyes.

Lewis never lies. He has a poker face when he plays blackjack with her, and sometimes a poker tongue when she asks questions. But when he does say something, it's the truth, and he expects other people to do the same.

He stands, head canted, silent, waiting.

She rubs her arm across her eyes. "In my head I call you and Mom by your first names. Yesterday I slipped and said 'Lillian' out loud. She said I was disrespectful. But I didn't mean it that way." They're people in their own right, just like she is. They don't call her Daughter, so why should she call them Father and Mother?

"She's strong on people doing the proper thing," he says. "So, you didn't tell a lie?"

"No, I didn't." She'll die right on the spot if Lewis doesn't believe her.

Lewis's face clears. "That's all right then." He turns back to the bones and Callie goes outside to stare down at the house, her stomach muscles clenched.

Lillian lied to Lewis. Why?

Because she's mean, just out and out mean, that's why. She knows Lewis hates lying and she knows Callie cares what he thinks.

The shock becomes anger, burns away her tears.

During a silent supper Lewis looks at Lillian a couple of times but says nothing. Afterward, Callie goes to the barn with him to do chores, her anger unappeased by sausages and mashed potatoes. The sunset is a washed-out yellow, the sky graying as dusk creeps over the valley.

The three horses whicker greetings and Buck, the bull calf, prances in his pen. Rosie, a red Hereford with a white face and dainty white ankles that don't seem big enough to carry her weight, tries to kick the pail as Lewis milks. He curses her in soothing tones. The barn is full of animal warmth, the rich smells of straw and manure.

While milk hisses into the pail, Callie cuddles Martha, pressing her cheek to the cat's thick silky fur. She's like a mobile patchwork quilt; splashes of gray, orange and black

supported by little white feet. Lillian says Martha is a tortoiseshell, but is that true? If Lillian lied to Lewis, she must tell other lies, too.

When Lewis is done, she pours milk for Martha and takes some to Buck. He's so rambunctious, even at three weeks, that he almost knocks her over when he butts against the pail. He puts his nose in the milk, blowing bubbles, while she tugs gently at the curly brown hair between his ears.

"Hurry up with the sheaves," Lewis says. "I want to get the chores done before it's too dark to see."

The ladder to the loft, narrow wooden bars nailed to the studs and extending four feet above the square opening in the loft floor, is beside the door. She tosses down oat sheaves and hears Dolly snorting as Lewis takes one into her stall. The cat scoots up the ladder and sits down to wash her face. It's a good thing Martha's body is lean under all that fur. When she gets fat, she has kittens and Lewis kills them. It must be awful to have babies and then lose them.

Climbing up the ladder is easy. Climbing down isn't. She stands at the edge of the opening, dizzy, knees like limp spaghetti. She keeps her gaze on the ladder, grips the top rung with both hands, feels with her feet for a rung and forces the rest of her body out into emptiness.

She could leave home to get away from Lillian. But she's probably too young to get a job.

In the chicken house, Lewis heaps chopped wheat in the feed trough while she fills the water dish. The chicken house is tiny, with a low roof, so the birds' body heat will keep them from freezing in winter. It's thick with the sour, stinging smell of their manure. She takes a big breath before going inside, but can't hold it long enough, and the sharp odor plunges up her nostrils.

She snorts to get rid of the smell but that doesn't work. Just like it won't work to fight with her mother. Lillian's anger always explodes into frightening flames around her face.

But she can question everything Lillian says and does. See what other lies she tells. Catch her out when she's wrong. It's knowing what's really true that matters; she'll just have to endure the meanness. For a while.

Back in the house, chores done, she checks the schedule tacked to the wall beside the floor model radio. *The Shadow* comes on at eight. His eerie laugh echoing in her head will make the dark even scarier than usual; she'd better go to the outhouse now. She puts on parka and boots again and is lighting the kerosene lantern when she remembers the poplar branch. It's gone.

She tramps to the front room doorway. "What happened to the poplar branch I brought home?"

"Don't wear boots in here!" Lillian's voice is sharp.

"I wanted to see the leaf buds open."

"Don't be silly. You should be doing your schoolwork and learning how to cook and sew, not fooling with useless tree branches. I threw it in the fire."

The room darkens. Lightening crackles in her head. She clamps her mouth shut. Hurries outside. Becomes aware that beyond the small yellow circle of kerosene light swinging in her hand, dark shadows flicker and move as if alive. The lightening fades.

"Jake! Jake, come and walk with me!"

Jake comes bouncing out of the night. She hurries along the hard-packed icy path,

Jake beside her, and babbles a stream of meaningless words to hold the monsters at bay. Slimy tentacles brush her face, black mouths yawn and fangs reach out to tear at her.

It's safe inside the outhouse, the door latched, the lantern giving off a little heat and an Eaton's catalog to read. She can't stay forever, though.

It's always worse going back to the house. The monsters behind the outhouse might get her the minute she steps onto the path. She pulls up her snow pants.

"Jake?" Where is the damn dog, anyway? Probably gone exploring and he'll come tearing back when she's halfway to the house and scare her out of a year's growth.

Years ago, Lillian said monsters lived in the clothes closet and they'd eat her up if she didn't do as she was told. She knew right away they had fangs and long arms to grab her with. She could think of nothing else that time Lillian locked her in the closet.

Her first day in grade one, when they lived at Poplar Ridge, and she's already learned a new word. She hurries from the one-room log schoolhouse and up a mile of dirt road edged with wild rose bushes, the word dancing in her head.

"Mom, what does 'fuck' mean?"

Lillian looms over her, face red, mouth a thin, pinched line, fury a flaming aura around her head. Clawed hands shake her till her bones hurt.

"That's a filthy, horrible word. Don't you ever say it again or I'll wash your mouth out with soap! Do you hear?"

The air shrouds her in cold mist and her tongue freezes to the roof of her mouth.

"I'll lock you in the closet. That's the only place for bad girls who say dirty words." She pinches Callie's ear between rough fingers and marches her to the bedroom.

The door clicks shut. She's alone in the dark, cold slimy tentacles reaching for her. She screams and pounds at the door, gasping for air, but no one comes. She pulls Lillian's clothes off the hangers and crawls in among them.

Beneath a heavy coat, she sucks her thumb and whimpers. Moisture leaks out from between her legs, soaking into Lillian's dresses. Shame raises her voice to a howl. The door slams open.

Lewis's voice, angry. "Hell and damnation, woman, what did you lock her in here for?"

"She used a bad word," Lillian says.

Lewis pulls Callie out and holds her against his shoulder while she sobs into his plaid wool shirt.

"Look at the mess she's made of my clothes!" Lillian begins picking them up, then shrieks with rage. "You filthy little animal! You've dirtied my dresses! I'll teach you a lesson you'll never forget."

Lewis slaps down Lillian's hand. "Like hell you will!"

"You have no right to tell me how to raise a child. Not after what you did!"

Lewis's body tenses. Finally, he takes a breath. "Leave her alone or I'll lock you in the goddam closet and see how you like it." He carries Callie to the front room and holds her on his lap until she stops crying.

She remembers a metal button on his denim overall bib pressing into her cheek and his heart thudding beneath her ear, remembers the smell of freshly washed denim and feeling safe in his arms. Why did Lillian say that to him? What terrible thing did he do?

Jake scratches at the outhouse door and whines. Callie joins him on the path. "Stay by me, Jake, don't run away." But after a moment, he trots away into the darkness.

Maybe Lillian wasn't lying when she said there was nothing to be afraid of, but the monsters feel true. Callie hurries toward the house, fighting an overpowering urge to look over her shoulder. The crunch of snow and her breathing are so loud she'd never hear the monsters' scaly feet, even if they were right at her heels.

She's running by the time she reaches the shed. She stumbles inside, shuts the door, and slams the bar into its slot. Lies are horrible. She needs to know the truth, to know what is real.

Chapter Two

Callie centers the Bible in a pool of sunshine on her ink-stained study table. As she scrapes the chair back, she bangs it against her knee and swears under her breath. She's grown three inches since fall, when Lewis marked her height on the door jamb as five foot three, and her body hasn't yet learned to fit its new shape to the furniture.

Months ago, she'd set out to read the whole Bible and now it's done, but she has to admit to skimming some of it. All that begetting and begatting was dull, and a lot of the language made no sense.

She has much better books: *Call of The Wild* and *The Yearling* and Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* that Peter gave her last year. Peter had put a note in with the *Mythology*: *When I've finished it, I'll give you a book about the ancient Greek philosophers. They thought there were just four basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water. All of them powerful and all necessary for life. I know you'll like it.*

She wishes he'd hurry up with the book. It sounds like truth. Plants need dirt for their roots, air, and water for growth. And sunlight, of course. That's probably what the Greek philosophers meant by fire.

Lewis's sister down east, Aunt Etta, has been sending books since Callie started taking school by correspondence. Some, like *Ulysses*, she sneaked into the cardboard box library in George's store in Millburn to trade for mysteries and westerns. She's using *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which is worse than the Bible, to press flowers.

The best book is *Wild Flowers Every Child Should Know*. Last summer she'd tried to match valley flowers to those in the book, but that didn't often work. Too bad Mr. Stack didn't write about every flower in the world.

This Christmas Aunt Etta sent her *The Mushroom Handbook*, which is fascinating but hard work; there are so many long words to look up. She'd read a few more pages last night, trying to absorb all the facts about meadow mushrooms before Lillian made her go to bed.

She'd stayed awake a long time, mulling over things Lillian might have lied about. Like religion. It's scary, but she's going to write Lillian a letter saying what she thinks about it. It's the only way to find out whether Lillian really believes in God or is using religion to frighten her into behaving.

Callie reaches for her fountain pen, but sunlight flashing on the frost-etched panes draws her gaze outside. The first day of spring is only two weeks away, but all she can see are fence posts sticking out of the drifted snow. The trees will bud out soon, though, and green things will grow just as they did in the myth of Persephone and the Underworld. She imagines Persephone rising from Hades and Demeter making sweet new grass shoot up. The horses will frisk on the pasture hill as they shed their shaggy winter coats and the April sun will be warm on her face, the bare earth awakening beneath her feet as she hikes the valley.

The frost on one windowpane looks like a cave with grass around it. Who would live there? Ice fairies, perhaps, with silvery, transparent wings and silver hair, clothes woven of ice grass. What would they eat? That's easy; rainbow beads of water through glass straws.

No, she doesn't want twinkle-toed fairies with gauzy wings. These will be Amazon

fairies, wearing knee-high leather boots, fur caps, and carrying knives on their belts. Their job is to protect plants and animals, and they'll have many adventures, but she can think about those later.

Before she starts the letter, there's something else she's been meaning to do. She flips the Bible open to the front flyleaf so she can write her name and address.

Cathleen McKenzie

Herron's Nest

She hasn't yet been able to talk Lewis into making a sign for the front gate. Not that many would see it. Since the first heavy snowfall in October, only three people have passed along the road allowance between the two quarter sections that make up Herron's Nest. The men on horseback were out hunting. The man with a team and open sled was lost and stopped at the house to find out where he was.

Millburn

Which is nothing but a general store and a post office.

Peace River Block

The address doesn't need that, but she likes the words.

British Columbia

Canada

The World

Under the address she writes her birth date, May 8, 1935. Books say that people write birth, marriage, and death dates in their Bibles. Lillian didn't write down Callie's birth date but that's not surprising.

In Poplar Ridge, where Lewis had homesteaded first and where she was born, the ladies held quilting bees. Callie had just turned five when it was Lillian's turn to be hostess. The ladies sat stitching and talking and didn't notice her slip into the house from her exile in the yard. She hid behind her bedroom door to listen.

One lady says, "Callie's a well-behaved little girl."

"I insist on obedience, and I don't let her get away with thinking she's anything special," Lillian says. "It's silly to be soft with children. My mother raised me by the book, and I turned out all right. Callie thinks she's hard done by, but it's for her own good."

"What book is that?"

"An old one," Lillian says, "but it still holds good. Babies are just little animals. It takes a great deal of work to make them into civilized human beings."

"It takes a lot of work just to feed and clothe them, especially when you have seven, as I do." Mrs. Ford's voice. "Which is three more than I wanted."

"Oh, I know how you feel," Lillian says. "It was a terrible shock when I found out I was expecting Callie. I already had my family, two great, growing boys of 14 and 15. Lewis wanted more children but that's a man for you; they don't have to change diapers and clean up messes or lose sleep when a baby cries all night."

One of the women laughs. "What men like best is doing what gets the babies."

"I suppose the Lord created them that way," Lillian says, "but it's a great pity we have to put up with it for the sake of having children."

"Some women like it." Mrs. Goode's voice.

"Not decent women!" Lillian snaps.

The others are silent. What do men do to get babies? Lillian says a stork brings them.

"Well, there's nothing to be done about it," Mrs. Ford says. "The babies come, and you have to look after them."

"I do my duty," Lillian says, "but the last thing I wanted was another baby."

Callie pulls the sharp edge of the door hard against her forehead until pain blocks out the words. A few minutes later she sneaks out the bedroom window, the hot July day cold on her skin, the air full of tears.

It doesn't matter; she can write her own name in the Bible. And put in a photograph of the whole family. Lillian won't know; she never looks at the book.

In the kitchen, a stove lid rattles as Lillian shoves wood on the fire. Callie tenses. Then a door squeaks and Lillian's rings clash against metal. That's all right. Her mother's taking out the big aluminum bowl — a thump as it hits the table — to make bread. She'll be too busy to check on what Callie's doing.

She pulls aside the curtain over her closet doorway and takes her shoebox of treasures from the top shelf. Inside is a photograph of Rory Calhoun, cut from a movie magazine her sister-in-law, Rita, left in the attic. He's handsome: dark brown wavy hair and gray eyes, perfect white teeth. His smile is a bit devilish, as if he likes to tease. She'd give anything to see him in a movie.

Beneath Rory's picture are souvenirs and a dozen dried out pinecones, seeds scattered everywhere. A dull green pebble from the Pine River, her father's medals, pearl earrings from Aunt Etta that Lillian won't let her wear and a photograph of the family taken last summer.

They're lined up beside the house. She looks the same except for being taller: long blonde braids, long skinny body, blue eyes. Lillian says Lewis's white hair used to be black and looked very fetching with his blue eyes. Peter is tall and black-haired, Russell short and brown-haired, his wife Rita even shorter. Russell and Peter joined the navy when she was four and didn't live at home after they were discharged. Sometimes they seem almost like strangers.

She glues the photo on the inside of the Bible's front cover. Underneath, she writes her parents' names, Lewis Lansford Duncan McKenzie and Lillian Graves McKenzie. She puts her brothers' names in, and everyone's birth date.

After Lillian reads the letter, maybe she'll allow Callie to quit the Sunday-school-by-mail course. But that was Lillian's idea, so it isn't likely.

"It's time you got a proper religious education," her mother had said in her no-nonsense voice. "I will not have you growing up an uncivilized little savage."

She's not little — she's already four inches taller than Lillian — and Rita says she looks more like sixteen than twelve.

Lillian decided correspondence lessons would do. Lewis is too busy to drive the truck to Fort St. John in summer, when the roads are open. Anyway, Lillian doesn't like the truck; it's noisy and stinks of grease and gasoline. It's a lot better than the wagon, though. The wagon has a plank seat but even with a folded blanket it's hard as hell.

Why is hell a swear word? It's only the name of a place and Lewis uses it all the time. Lillian says it's the devil's fire pit deep in the earth where you go if you're bad. That's as unbelievable as having a place called heaven up in the sky.

The trouble with the Sunday School course is that it wants her to believe a lot of unbelievable stuff. The Bible says God made the world in seven days, but that's not long enough to make the earth and millions of plants. He couldn't have made even the Herron

Valley plants in seven days. And what about snowflakes? Her science book says every one is different and there must be trillions of them.

Callie pulls a pad of blue-lined foolscap toward her and writes a paragraph before she notices her middle finger is stained with ink again. If the crop is good this year, maybe she'll get a new fountain pen for Christmas.

The Bible has some interesting stories, but I don't think they're true. I believe they were written by men who wanted everyone to be good. The ten commandments are all right because if everyone obeyed them, we wouldn't have any trouble in the world.

During the war there were stories on the radio about all the horrible things the Japanese and Germans did to people. She woke, night after night, from nightmares about babies being bayoneted and cities being bombed until she learned to cover her ears when the news was on.

I think everyone should obey the ten commandments and I'm willing to do that.

In fact, she only agrees with the three that say not to kill, steal or lie. The rest don't seem important.

But I don't believe in heaven, hell, God, or the devil.

Before the Sunday School lessons, she'd thought being educated meant knowing the entire truth about the world, which is what she wants. Some people must believe the Bible is true, but she can't; it simply doesn't make sense. So, is religious education a special kind meant just for those who do believe? A special kind of truth?

She folds the letter and presses her thumb along the folds. Her course instructions say, 'Student must think for himself' and she's done that, written down the truth as she sees it and promised to obey the commandments. Lillian can't argue with that. Can she?

Lillian's worn, blunt-fingered hands thump and fold bread on the kitchen table, the air thick with the sweet-sour smell of yeast, jack pine crackling in the wood stove. The dough yields, becomes round and smooth, allows itself to be smeared with lard and covered with a damp cloth. She washes her hands and polishes the gold wedding band with a tea towel.

Callie steps past the cellar door into the kitchen.

Lillian gives her a dark look. "If you have nothing better to do, go bring in more wood."

The grouchy tone is not a good sign. Usually, Lillian's voice is kind of middling, not too high and not too low, but when she sounds like an angry wasp it's time to back off.

"I wrote you a letter." Maybe the idea of a letter will put her mother in a better mood.

Lillian's laugh is scornful. "Why write a letter when you can talk to me? You are a silly child."

That's not fair. Lillian never listens to more than three sentences before she says in her most proper English voice, 'Children should be seen and not heard.'

"Put it on the front room table and I'll read it later." Lillian begins scrubbing bits of sticky bread dough off the oilcloth.

Callie walks into the front room. Her heart is banging against her ribs and her throat is tight. Maybe she'll just toss the letter in the airtight heater and let it burn. Is telling the truth about her ideas worth the risk of Lillian screaming at her?

Yes.

But not today.

She takes the letter back to her room and opens her small scrapbook of dried flowers and leaves. The bright yellow poplar leaf she put in last fall is brittle and cracking away from the glue, the edges sharp against her fingers. She can get another when the leaves turn in the fall, but there must be a better way of preserving them, so they don't fall apart.

Chapter Three

Four days before the equinox, a warm chinook wind streams out of the southwest, singing a spring song. Water drips from tree limbs, snowbanks, and icicles, gathering on the hillsides and running, bubbling with glee, to the creek. In the farmhouse, Monday is laundry day, and the kitchen is filled with steam, sunlight, and the lingering fragrance of coffee and crisp-fried bacon. The fire in the wood stove crackles and spits under a copper boiler of water being heated for the washing machine.

The open kitchen door spills light and heat into the back shed where Callie fights with the washer, a copper tub with a hand-operated agitator. Pushing the wooden handle back and forth is so boring it hurts. But today she has a question to ask and worrying about how Lillian will react takes the edge off the boredom.

Lillian comes to the door. "Those sheets should be ready to come out."

She feeds one into the hand wringer and tries to control the sudden trembling in her hands. "Mom, can I go to Fort St. John for grade eight in September?"

"No." Lillian shoves a pail underneath the drain and turns the tap. Soap-scummed water pours into the pail.

"Why not? That's almost high school."

"Twelve is too young to be away from home."

"You said kids in England go to boarding school at eight or nine."

"Only boys go to boarding school." Lillian's voice is sharp. "Young ladies stay home and help their mothers when they're not attending to their lessons."

She should have known that argument wouldn't work. It rarely pays to repeat one of Lillian's statements back to her. At least she just said no; she didn't explode into one of her unexplainable rages.

Lillian fills the second bucket. "Here, take these out and dump them."

Callie shoves her moccasin-clad feet into overshoes. Should she keep pushing for school in town? Teachers might tell the truth about how the world works, or at least tell her what books to read.

She walks past the house and flings the dirty water over the gully bank onto a mound of ice built up since fall. The top layer of ice crackles and steams.

"Fee-bee! Fee-bee!" The chickadees are singing their spring song in the bare brown willows. In winter they sing 'chick-a-dee-dee-dee.' They have such perky black heads and bright eyes. It's wonderful how trees and birds survive the cold. In January the temperature was fifty degrees below zero Fahrenheit for a week, and Lillian hung suet in the willows for the birds. If Callie stood very still, the chickadees would take crumbs from her hand. It was hard not to jump when those tiny cold feet landed on her skin.

"Are you going to moon out there all day?" Lillian's irritable voice from the back door. "We have work to do."

Lillian hands her two clean buckets for fresh water. She trudges back along the path. The chinook has turned the snow to slippery mush, and she edges sideways down the slope to the barrel in the gully.

If this year's wheat crop is good, maybe Lewis will pipe water into the house. Still, this is better than Poplar Ridge where Lillian melted snow in the boiler. Rainwater, collected off the roof, was never enough, and they had to drive to the Pine River and fill

barrels. In winter Lewis dug scoop-outs in the pasture and packed them with snow so the animals would have drinking water in summer.

Lewis homesteaded here, in Herron Valley, because of the spring, because water is so important. At the foot of the steep pasture hill, the spring bubbles out from beneath a sandstone ledge all year round. He says pressure from the water table keeps it from freezing, even in the coldest weather.

He and Russell bored a hole into the hillside under the sandstone ledge, shoved pipe a few feet into the hill, then sank a barrel in the ground beneath the end of the pipe. Now the water comes through the pipe into the barrel, then flows over the edge and down the gully to a second barrel behind the house. From there it flows on another two hundred yards to the creek.

With water piped in, she wouldn't have to lug it from the spring, but she'd miss hearing the water sing every day. She scoops icy water into the buckets and listens to the stream ripple around the willows. The little bumps that will become catkins are beginning to swell now. She'll check them every day, watch how they grow. She'd still like to bring a poplar branch into the house and see how fast the buds open, but Lillian would only throw it out.

Lillian fills the tub with hot water to do the shirts, overalls, and socks. As Callie swings the handle back and forth, she looks around the shed, trying to think of more arguments for school in town. A waist-high workbench runs beneath a small window on the north wall. Stacked beneath is firewood, fresh-split spruce sweet with resin. The bench is cluttered with tools, containers of milk and butter, and other odds and ends, a way station for things on their way in or out of the house.

Nothing there but a reminder that when the washing is done, she'll have to bring in more firewood.

The shed is small and cramped, like the kitchen. The other walls are used for hanging the copper boiler, a galvanized tin bathtub, and coats. The washing machine lives in one corner, a stool and some boots in another. The smell of harness oil from the bits of harness her father mends in the winter blends with that of soap flakes.

When she asked Lewis why he hadn't built a bigger house he said, "The more space, the more you have to heat." She'd felt stupid not to have thought of that. As it is, the wood stove and airtight heater barely keep the house comfortable during the deep cold. The baseboard nail heads bear miniature mushroom caps of frost all winter and the attic door is kept shut to prevent heat from escaping upstairs.

"Callie! You're dreaming again." Lillian turns the wringer while Callie feeds clothes into it. "Careful! Make sure the buttons go through flat, otherwise they'll break."

She'll never remember all this trivial stuff.

"The school would have lots of books and a microscope I could use to look at cross sections of plants."

"If you're so interested in plants, you can give me more help weeding the garden. Young ladies don't need an education. When you grow up, you'll be looking after a husband and children and keeping house."

"They teach Home Economics in high school."

"You can learn that here." Lillian loads the washer again. "If we didn't live in this godforsaken backwoods, you could take piano and singing lessons as I did when I was a girl. A course in elocution wouldn't do you any harm either. You mumble like an old man

talking into his beard."

She can't help it if her voice is low like Lewis's. "You wouldn't have to cook for me or do my laundry."

Lillian flashes her an exasperated look. "It's just as easy to cook and wash for three as it is for two."

She'd better ease up or Lillian will be mad instead of just irritated. She pushes the handle and sings.

Oh, my darling, oh, my darling,
Oh, my darling Clementine,
You are lost and gone for ever,
Dreadful sorry, Clementine.

The song has exactly the right rhythm for pushing the agitator handle. She wonders how many times it will fit into fifteen minutes.

Too many times. Callie drains the wash water and takes it outside, glancing up the slope to the workshop. She knows Lewis is in there because Jake is lying close to the door, ears cocked, looking across the valley.

What do dogs think about? If she were a dog, she'd think about biting Lillian.

She helps carry the boiler from the kitchen stove out to the shed and pour water for the first rinse. Another agonizing eternity on the agitator. Slosh, slosh, slosh.

When Lillian complains about hearing *Clementine* too often, Callie switches to *Don't Fence Me In*. The beat isn't as good, but the words make a lot more sense.

Finally, it's time for the second rinse. She dunks the bag of bluing into the water and squeezes it. Sky color squirts between her fingers and moves in long, smooth streams to circle the side of the tub. She stirs them until the water is a cloudless pool of blue sky.

By noon, when she goes to call Lewis in for dinner, the chinook wind is snapping at the sheets and clothes pegged on the line. She can hardly wait for them to dry so she can bury her face in their fresh sun-smell.

"In a minute," Lewis says. The old felt hat shades his eyes from sunshine struggling through the grimy window. Lillian says the hat is a disgrace, but he wears it to keep his head warm. Lewis's white hair is thin, hinting at the skull beneath.

Callie leans her elbows on the work bench. "Dad, will you teach me how to use the rifle this summer?"

He raises his eyes from cleaning the truck carburetor. "You're too skinny; the recoil would knock you flat."

"I know to hold the stock tight against my shoulder. I've been using the .410 shotgun for two years."

"You need a clear eye and a steady hand with the rifle. It's harder to hit the target with a bullet than a wide pattern of shot." He wipes the carburetor.

A clear eye and a steady hand. That's another way of saying you have to see what's true.

In the lean-to, she inspects the elk bones. Last week, she and Lewis had found enough vertebrae at the lake for the whole spine. They're wired together, resting on sawhorses, and he's begun attaching ribs. On the walk, Lewis told her about tapping sugar maples for syrup when he was a boy down east. He can name the trees in the valley, but she wants a book that lists every tree in the world and tells how they grow and multiply.

Jake trots ahead to the house, plumed tail waving, and lies down by the shed door,

waiting for Lillian to bring him a dish of scraps. Callie sets the table while Lillian fries potatoes and empties a jar of deer meat into a pan to heat.

"Dad, what do you think about me going to school in town next fall?"

"I've already told you no." Lillian frowns. "I don't see why you have to keep harping at it."

"You'd better stick to correspondence for a while yet." At the wash bench Lewis washes his hands and splashes water on his lined, stubbled face. "I need you on the farm, what with Peter stargazing and Russell being a big shot in town."

"If that wife of Russell's hadn't wanted to live in town," Lillian says, "he'd have got land here under the VLA and you could have helped each other." She slices bread like it was Rita's neck under the knife. "I don't know what he sees in that girl. And she dresses like a tramp; I've never seen her in anything but those awful pants. I'd be surprised if she even owns a pair of stockings."

Callie has heard these comments a hundred times, but she can't see anything wrong with Rita. She's pretty, with that curly red hair, and full of fun. Anyway, Russell has a steel plate in his knee; farming would be too hard for him.

Lewis turns on the radio in the front room. The familiar marching song fills the air, followed by a somber male voice, "And now the Winnipeg grain report." When it's over and the newscaster starts talking about President Truman, Lewis comes back to the kitchen.

After dinner, when Lillian is pouring tea, Callie says, "Does it cost a lot to stay in the school dormitory?"

"Whatever it costs, we don't have the money." Lillian slams the teapot back on the stove. "And I've been wearing the same winter coat for fifteen years, so just forget it."

She'd better not give her mother the religion letter today. Lillian's too riled up.

Lewis lights his pipe, the acrid sweet scent of tobacco smoke filling the room. "Might get a good crop this year."

"Or next year." Lillian sighs. "Whoever called the Peace Block 'next year country' certainly got it right."

"We're better off than a lot of people." Lewis sharpens the end of a wooden match with his pocketknife and picks his teeth. "If I hadn't quit the railroad in '29 to go homesteading, we might have starved."

"The depression was just an excuse. You grew up with dirt under your fingernails and you couldn't wait to get back to the farm."

"It's better than putting up with political bullshit from the CPR."

"Mind your language! It was obvious to me from the beginning that you couldn't abide authority. I don't know how you managed in the army."

The silence stretches like a rubber band and Lillian pours more tea.

Lewis says, "The dormitory can't cost much. It's just a couple of army huts the U.S. Corps of Engineers left when they finished building the highway."

"Whatever they charge, it's too much," Lillian says.

Living in an army hut could be fun. It might have running water and an inside toilet, too, like the house Russell and Rita live in.

After dinner, Lewis goes outside, and Lillian decides she has time for a nap. Callie tiptoes up to the attic with her grammar book, looking forward to the space and silence, and pretending she has the house to herself.

There's not much room to walk around in the attic but the windows at each end let in so much light that it seems big. Cardboard boxes cram the sides and clothes hang on nails in the rafters. When Peter comes home, he'll sleep up here and they'll have long talks, Peter on one cot, her on the other, and he'll play the guitar for her. He's taking astronomy and his last letter described the university library, huge rooms filled with books floor to ceiling. It would be wonderful to have that many books.

She'd like to write and tell him about wanting to go to school in town, but Lillian might ask what she's written. Lillian says she'd never read anyone else's private letters, but that doesn't stop her asking nosy questions. And if her questions don't get answered, watch out!

Callie goes to a box of Rita's old magazines and takes one. She riffles pages until an ad for a fireplace catches her eye. The white marble reflects color from the flames: peach, red, mauve, and gold, like cloud fire. A mother and father and two kids sit in front of the fire, smiling, looking happy. The mother has her arms around the kids.

She tries to imagine what it would feel like to have Lillian or Lewis put an arm around her, but somehow she can't. Under her shirt, her skin feels cold.

She tosses the magazine on the floor. Her mind stills, absorbs the silence, becomes open to the words in her book. She's almost finished the chapter on verbs when she hears Lewis come in for his afternoon tea.

Should she go down? She doesn't feel like listening to them, though the house is so small she mostly can't help hearing what people say unless they whisper. She picks up her book and shuts out the voices until she hears her name.

She creeps to the metal chimney rising from the cook stove below. There's a gap around the pipe and every word is clear.

"She's too young to go away to school," Lillian says. Boiling water hisses into the teapot. "I wish we'd never left Poplar Ridge. At least she could have kept going to the school and we'd have had some social life."

"The soil is better here and there's plenty of water. That's what farming is all about," Lewis says.

That's what life is all about, too. Earth, water, air, and fire to make plants grow, so they can be used for food and clothes and houses.

"I know." Lillian sounds irritable. "I just wish you hadn't picked a place in the middle of nowhere." Tea gurgles into cups. "The only neighbor closer than Millburn is old Sutherland. No Women's Institute, no school. No nothing. I loved those school dances in Poplar Ridge."

Lillian had taught her the schottische when she was six and too old to be put to bed with the babies on a pile of coats near the pot-bellied heater. The man who played accordion rested his head on the blackboard and left a grease spot that never washed off.

"They were all right, I guess," Lewis says. "If the government plowed the roads, we could get out to Fort St. John with the truck in winter."

"The government won't plow the roads until we have more people here. I don't know what we'll do if we ever need a dentist or a doctor in the wintertime." Lillian's using her tired voice, but it has a bite. "Oh, I know it suits you. You're a lone wolf. And maybe you

have reason to be."

"Damn it, leave my past sins out of this," Lewis says. His voice is quiet but has a hard edge, too. "What happened happened. I can't go back and change it."

She wishes he hadn't said that because Lillian might have started talking about his sin, whatever it was.

There is silence for a moment, then Lillian says, her voice milder. "Another thing about the town school, you never know what kind of people she'd be associating with. They might let Indians into the school."

That would be neat. Indians could teach her which roots and berries are edible. Then she could go live on a peaceful island all by herself, like Robinson Crusoe.

"Well, she's company for you." The smell of Lewis's pipe wafts up through the gap.

"No better than a cat or dog. She always has her nose in a book. I've told her time and time again she's not to read until her work is done, but she never listens. Even when she's doing chores, her mind is off somewhere else."

Lillian is still mad at her because she was reading *A Girl of the Limberlost* yesterday and forgot to feed the chickens.

"Hard to imagine the place without her," Lewis says. "She's a big help, too."

"She's more help to you than me and that's a mistake. She should be learning to run a house, not a farm."

"She likes farming, which is more than I can say for those two sons of yours. No reason she can't run this place when she grows up; she's a good worker. I don't want everything I've built up going to a stranger someday."

"Nonsense. It's a man's job to run a farm." Loud clink of teacup against saucer. "The only suitable jobs for women are nursing and teaching, before they find husbands."

Why can't a woman be a farmer? Doubt creeps into the recesses of her mind like the tendrils of a wild strawberry plant forming new roots. Is there something else Lillian hasn't told her about what will happen when she grows up?

"She can go to town for the last year or two of high school and then work for a little while," Lillian continues. "It would be a way for her to meet an eligible man, perhaps a banker or a doctor, and live in town."

"She might want to marry a farmer."

"God forbid!"

Lewis's boots thud on the kitchen linoleum and the back door slams.

Why does Lewis walk away when Lillian says something mean? He could say something mean back, but he hardly ever does. When it happens, though, Lillian looks scared and it's days before she snipes at him again.

Callie tiptoes back to the cot and tries to read but her mind keeps straying. Lillian wants to live in town, but Lewis wouldn't be happy. Too many people and too many rules and restrictions when you work for somebody else. That's what he says, anyway.

If they'd let her go away for school, she wouldn't have to endure Lillian's rages. On the other hand, schools have rules, and she hates those as much as Lewis does.

Even worse, she'd have to leave the valley. She looks out at the hills and the willows marking the creek bed. Under the soft blue sky, snow is melting fast, exposing black earth here and there. Soon tiny seedlings will poke their green heads through the soil.

An hour later, she comes downstairs to find Lillian peeling apples for a pie.

"What were you doing up there?" Lillian hands her a basin. "Make yourself useful

and get some potatoes and carrots from the cellar. And a jar of raspberry jelly."

Callie heads down the steps, flashlight held like a talisman before her, trying not to imagine what might be in the dark, cobwebbed corners. In the dank cold at the bottom, she wrinkles her nose at the sour smells of sprouting potatoes, moldy carrots, and old mouse turds.

She plays the flashlight over jars of jelly and jam. Raspberry jelly is a rich, clear red and quivers on toast like living rubies. The memory of sweet tartness makes her mouth water. A raspberry picked from the bush is better, though, the sweetness fresher, more real somehow.

She fills the enamel basin with potatoes and carrots, but her mind is out in sunlit summer fields. Lewis is getting old and someday he won't be able to do farm work anymore. Then she can put up a sign that says *Herron's Nest* and it will be her farm. By that time, other people will probably have moved into the valleys to the east.

A new farmer comes to see her and says, "Miss McKenzie, what do you think I should plant in the top field?"

"Oh, wheat or barley will do better there than oats. Have you thought about rape seed?"

"I hear it's getting a good price now," he says.

"I'm going to try it in the bottom field this year."

He gives her an admiring glance. "That's very forward thinking of you, Miss McKenzie."

Lewis says he still has a few good years in him, but she should start asking questions now, so she'll actually know where wheat and barley grow best. It feels like the farm already belongs to her, but she still wants to go to university before she takes over.

She lugs the vegetables and jelly up the steep cellar stair. Doing housework is boring, boring, boring.

Lillian is putting navy beans to soak. Callie picks up a handful of the dry, white seed pods and fingers them. They seem so lifeless it's hard to believe they can grow into plants. When Lillian's back is turned, she puts them in her pocket. She'll do an experiment with earth, air, fire, and water, like the ancient Greek philosophers. At least Lillian can't complain that beans are useless.

When the barn chores have been done and the lamps lit, Callie checks the list of radio programs: Fibber Magee and Molly with their cluttered closet, Amos and Andy, The Shadow, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, The Lone Ranger. On winter Saturdays it's always Foster Hewitt and Hockey Night in Canada but the series will soon be over.

Tonight, there's only classical music from *KING* in Seattle. Lewis reads while Lillian and Callie work on a hooked rug to the steady hiss of the gas lamp.

The rug is stretched on a wooden frame and tied with heavy cord. Callie works with a steel hook on one end, Lillian on the other, pulling loops of material – old cloth cut into strips – through the coarse burlap. This rug has a gray background with red roses and green leaves. She'll be glad when it's finished; after an hour, her fingers ache and the knuckle that scrapes against the burlap feels raw.

"This is the prettiest rug we've made," Lillian says. "I'm glad you thought of using

that old red shirt of yours for the roses."

Amazing. Lillian hardly ever says anything nice to her. Should she bring out the religion letter? No, Lillian will be annoyed if the rug-hooking is disrupted.

Later, while Lillian makes cocoa in the dim light of the kitchen coal oil lamp, the radio plays *The Flight of the Bumblebee*. The music is urgent, thrilling, flashing through Callie's veins with butterfly wings. She follows the notes with her fingers and twirls around, awkward, constricted by the small room.

Lillian brings the cocoa. "Act your age, for heaven's sake. You're too big and clumsy to gallop around in here."

A great yearning fills her, an ache for something she can't name. "Isn't that tune beautiful?"

"Very lively, but I prefer music that's quieter and more dignified."

The song ends and she slumps at the table. Her cocoa tastes bitter. She can't explain the feelings she gets from music because she doesn't know the words for them; doesn't even know if anyone else has them. If her parents have them, they never say so.

Lewis makes his last trip to the outhouse and comes back with a fat log from the wood pile. The lid of the airtight heater rattles against the chimney as he rakes up the coals, followed by a sharp, stinging whiff of smoke when he feeds the log to the fire. Flames lick around the wood and chips of ice embedded in the bark sizzle, steam and vanish. Sparks snap and the expanding metal creaks, then quiets when the draft is closed and the fire settles down to a slow burn.

Callie pulls the dark, green curtain across her doorway, puts on the flannelette pajamas she toasted at the heater and scrambles into her cot. The weather started turning cold again at dusk and the sheets are icy.

Musical bumblebees still soaring in her head, she slides her hands inside her pajama bottoms and feels herself Down There. She doesn't know what else to call those soft, mysterious folds of flesh between her legs but there's one particular spot, close to her belly, that feels urgent excitement when she rubs it between the folds.

Once she'd been scratching herself as she walked into the kitchen and Lillian had snapped, "Don't do that! Touching yourself down there is dirty."

The way Lillian says 'dirty' makes even the word itself sound revolting. So, there's no hope of finding out from her the proper name for Down There. What makes touching it dirty? She has to touch it when she's having a bath.

She gently rubs that special spot, pleasure pulsing through her body and tries not to breathe too loud in case her parents hear it. There is only a thin curtain over their doorway, too.

The tingling feeling floods her body, and she covers her face with the blankets until her breathing returns to normal. The bed is cozy now. She snuggles in her nest amid her own comforting smells and remembers the first time it happened, the spring of her eighth birthday.

Lewis is looking for land. Behind the hotel they're staying in, she burrows in tall winter-browned grass beside the river and discovers how to touch herself Down There. A train waits on the bridge above the roiled, muddy water, steam hissing into the sunny air.

The pleasure is intense. Afterward, she picks up the scribbler she'd brought with her. The blank sheets demand words, a story, but she doesn't know how to begin.

Wanting to write a story that day felt the same as listening to *The Flight of The Bumblebee* tonight. Music and words and her body call to her, want her to do something, but she doesn't know what. The answers must be in books somewhere and she is going to find them if she has to read every book in the world.

A worrisome problem wriggles into her mind before she can escape into sleep. Will touching herself Down There give her a baby? Is that what Lillian means by 'dirty'? She'd tried to find out after a girl at school talked about 'the curse' and said it had to do with babies.

Lillian had given her a booklet about menstruation. When Callie asked what blood had to do with babies, where they came from and how they got started, Lillian got mad and said Callie would find out when she was married, that her husband would teach her what she needed to know.

Anyway, the words in the booklet had seemed strange and somehow unconnected to her body. If they told her what Down There was called, she's forgotten now. Anyway, nothing was said about how babies are made.

Her periods began a year ago and Lillian taught her how to wash the rags and dry them in her closet, so Lewis never sees them. But she still doesn't know what would make her get a baby. She's seen kittens and calves being born, but she doesn't know how they get started either.

Two things are certain: a baby comes from inside its mother and breasts give milk. Making a baby probably has something to do with a man and a woman living together. *Wild Flowers* says there are male and female flowers and, to make seeds, pollen is carried from one to the other by insects and wind. The trouble is, the book also says some flowers pollinate themselves. Which way do humans work? She could ask Lewis about it, but he'd tell her to ask her mother and that's hopeless.

As she drifts toward sleep, the bed in her parents' room stops creaking. They're often restless sleepers; their noisy bed keeps her awake at least once or twice a week.

Chapter Four

Callie wakes to an icy nose nudging her face and a wet tongue licking her cheek. "Jake, stop it!"

The collie has ice caked between his pads and the thick white fur on his chest is cold under her fingers. He lives outside, but is allowed in every morning to wake her. His feathery tail sweeps the clothes off her chair as he tries to dig her out.

Ice is creeping up the windowpanes again; hard to believe the first day of spring was a week ago. She snatches her long underwear from the floor and pulls it beneath the covers to warm against her body. Jake loses interest and trots out to the kitchen.

Ugh! The crotch is all wet. Jake must have been licking it. She rubs it dry on the sheets. She'd get dressed under the blankets, but the bed is too small and there isn't enough space for a bigger one.

Too small to swing a cat in, Lewis had said once, and her mind conjured up a picture of him holding a cat by the tail and swinging it around her bedroom.

"You wouldn't do that to a cat, would you?" she'd asked, angry tears gathering in her eyes.

He was surprised she didn't know he meant a cat-o-nine-tails, a kind of whip. Still, every time someone says the words, she sees a terrified cat being swung by the tail.

She buttons the underwear and shifts from one cold foot to the other beside the heater while pulling on a homemade red flannel shirt, heavy wool slacks, and socks. Before she puts on her deer skin moccasins, she rubs the velvety nap against her cheek. The smoky scent lingers, tantalizing as a whiff of cheese.

In her room, she braids her hair and inspects the three tobacco cans on her table, half-hidden behind some books, and a fourth can under the bed. No sign of sprouts yet. She'd taken soil from the cellar and planted five navy beans in each pot. Each set of beans has earth, but everything else is different. The pot under the bed won't get sunlight. One on the table won't get water. In another, she's packed the earth in so hard they won't get air. The fourth set will get everything. If she's guessed right, only this last set will germinate. And, if she's lucky, Lillian won't find out what she's doing.

She fills a dipper from the stove's hot water reservoir and pours it into the wash basin. Both Lillian and Lewis bump into her as she washes her face and brushes her teeth. "For heaven's sake hurry up and get out of the way." Lillian sounds irritable.

Callie puts brown sugar on her oatmeal, pushing a hard lump to the bottom of the bowl to save for a last sweet mouthful, and pours milk on top. Porridge feels so smooth and creamy in her mouth and comforting in her stomach.

Lillian offers to fill Lewis's bowl again.

He shakes his head. "I've had enough."

"Did I put too much salt in?" Lillian hovers, the spoon poised over the saucepan.

"It's good," he says, "but I'm full."

Lillian gives him an unbelieving look and scoops the oatmeal into Callie's bowl. "Eat it up. We can't afford to waste food."

Her mother always gets upset if people don't gobble up everything she's cooked and tell her how wonderful it is.

While Callie's drying dishes, Lillian glances up from scrubbing the porridge pot and

frowns. "It's time you started wearing a brassiere. When you were jumping around last night you were jiggling. That's indecent."

Jiggling! Her breasts are just two small bumps and it's hard to imagine anyone noticing them, let alone detecting a jiggle. But needing a brassiere proves she's almost grown up. "When can we get one?"

"I'll order one from Eaton's catalog."

Rats! It'll be weeks before she gets to wear it.

Next fall, she'll look in the winter catalogue for linen tea towels to replace the bleached flour sacks they're using now. Lewis might let her get some as a Christmas present for Lillian. She wants to price bridles, too. It's silly to have a saddle horse and no bridle. She reaches over to put a bowl on the sideboard and misses. The bowl clatters to the floor.

"Callie! For heaven's sake, watch what you're doing. Go on, take water and scraps out to the chickens and bring the eggs in. I'll finish the dishes myself."

Twenty minutes later she comes out of the chicken house to find Jake, ears perked, tail wagging, pawing at a lump under the shrinking, tattered snow. It's a small owl.

She holds the frozen body in her hands, looks at the closed eyes and motionless hooked beak. The feathers on his back are gray, those on his breast white. His tail is barred, his round head covered with fuzzy down. The feathers on his breast are soft, too, and thick.

"What do you think happened to him?" she asks Lillian at the back door.

"Starved to death, probably."

Lewis says every living thing has to die sometime but it's sad the little owl will never fly again, never hunt, never stare at her with unblinking yellow eyes from a poplar branch. She plucks one of his wing feathers to put in her box of treasures.

"I'm going to bury him and put a marker on his grave." She rubs the tears off her face. "Poor little owl."

"Don't be a ninny," Lillian says. "It's only a bird." But her tone is mellower than her words. "Why don't you bury him up in the pasture where the wind's blown most of the snow away?"

Surprised, Callie picks up the owl and hurries to the workshop before Lillian changes her mind.

Lillian has on her old winter coat and overshoes when she walks up the hill. Callie kneels to stick a wooden marker into the frozen chunks of earth covering the owl.

"You've done the right and proper thing." Her mother's voice has the warmth of freshly ironed sun-dried cotton.

They walk back to the house, Lillian's face relaxed and serene. Callie gets the religion letter from her room and holds it out. "This is the letter I wrote you."

"I wondered where that had got to." Lillian smiles as she takes it.

Callie goes back to her overdue arithmetic lessons. Lillian's in a good mood now. She's sure to be pleased with a letter that shows Callie can think for herself.

A few minutes later the staccato of Lillian's oxfords invades the room. Her mother is clutching the letter. "What do you mean by writing me all this nonsense?"

"I thought…"

"Don't answer back! You don't think at all. Who put the idea that there's no God into your head? You should be ashamed of yourself."

Callie shrinks from Lillian's fiery gaze. She doesn't know where her mother's rage comes from, but it's always there, ready to burst into flames. "But…"

"Don't you 'but' me! You're going to Fort St. John. Your godmother will take you to church, and you'll be taught what's right. It's time you were confirmed anyway. And don't argue. It's for your own good." Lillian tosses Callie's letter on the table. She begins to turn away and stops. "It was *you* that took all my saucers! What are you doing with those filthy old tobacco cans?"

"I planted navy beans in them."

Lillian stares at her, then shakes her head and marches out, heels hammering the floor.

Callie blinks, but tears slide down her eyelashes and fall on the arithmetic papers. It isn't fair to be yelled at for telling the truth. And confirmation will mean more lessons and swearing in front of a bishop to things she doesn't believe. It's wrong to lie, but what can she do?

Callie rereads her letter, trying to ignore the ache behind her breastbone. At least she learned one thing; Lillian really does believe in God. But that doesn't prove anything and if believing in God means being like Lillian, she doesn't even want to think about it.

It takes a long time to settle to arithmetic. A snow flurry beats against the window, a strong wind keening around the house. The owl's grave will be buried already.

The bottom panes of the window are almost covered with frost. The Amazon fairies' cave has grown larger amid a thick jumble of ice grass. She scratches a path through it with her pen. The fairies might use this path, but she can't decide if it's dangerous or if they can come and go as they please.

A book of Poe's stories lies on the windowsill. They make her feel like she's in a damp, dark cellar full of rotting turnips. He takes a page to say what could be said in a paragraph and his sentences are so long and involved that by the end of one, she's forgotten how it began. To hell with Poe; she'll write her own story.

She begins to write to the background hum of Lillian's treadle sewing machine in the front room. First, she'll describe the fairies, where they live and what they eat.

"Callie! I was calling you." Lillian comes in. "What are you doing?"

She's not going to lie. "Writing a story." Her gut clenches. She'll die if Lillian reads it and laughs.

"What a waste of time! You can peel the potatoes for supper. And bring my saucers back. Tinfoil will do just as well to drain those pots. Only mind you don't use too much, it's expensive." Lillian bustles back to the kitchen.

At least Lillian didn't make her get rid of the bean pots. She would if she knew about the experiment, though; even a few sacrificed beans would be a 'waste.'

One ear cocked for Lillian's footsteps, she scribbles a few more lines, wondering what the fairies will wear in winter. They could have fur coats to match their hats. But they might have some magic way of keeping out the cold. She tucks the story away. It's probably not as good as Poe but at least nobody would have trouble understanding what she's written.

While she peels potatoes, Callie decides the fairies will have to fight a Black Witch

who has a red face and wears oxfords underneath her long black robe.

She's under the bed covers with a flashlight and *Ramrod*, a cowboy story by Luke Short, when Lewis and Lillian start talking in the front room.

"That child has to be taken to Cathleen for confirmation lessons," Lillian says.

The lid of Ogden Fine Cut tobacco rattles. Lewis says, "Can't take her till the snow melts and the roads dry up."

He won't let her go when he's seeding, either; he needs her help. She hears a match being struck on the underside of the table and the creak of his chair as he leans back. She watched him build that pine chair, sand it, put on walnut stain, tack leather over seat and back pads. Now he'll prop his elbows on the armrests, his feet on the table, and puff gray-blue smoke at the ceiling.

"I don't know where she picks up these strange ideas. Why on earth would she think there's no God?"

Lewis spends a lot of time in his head, and he hardly ever says what goes on in there. Callie has a hunch he doesn't believe in God either. The one time she and Lillian went to church, on an Easter Sunday when the roads were clear and Cathleen came to get them, Lewis refused to go.

"She's smart. Probably thought it up herself."

"We don't need that kind of 'smart' around here. She has no business questioning her betters."

"I don't hold with religion myself. Why not let her make up her own mind about it when she's older?"

"Lewis, she's just an ignorant child and she needs to be taught proper beliefs and conduct." The rattle of a teacup being put down. "There's no use looking at me like that. My mind's made up."

One of them turns on the radio for the ten o'clock news. Callie squirms under the covers. Why didn't he stick up for her, like the time Lillian locked her in the closet? Maybe Lillian would yell at him about his 'sin.'

Fort St. John is all right; it's her godmother she doesn't like. Cathleen Harris, for whom she's named, is forever asking nosy questions but never listens to the answers. And she'll have to put up with Cathleen's two bratty boys.

She slides the book and flashlight under the bed. The hero, Dave Nash, is badly wounded and hiding from the bad guys in an old mine. She's desperate to find out what courageous and surprising thing he will do to get out of the situation, but Lillian is bound to look in any minute now to see if she's asleep.

Stars shine like specks of ice in the blue-black sky outside her window. Lillian is willing to send her to town for a religious education; why not for ordinary school, too? Then she wouldn't have to do housework. She doesn't mind sawing wood and cleaning manure out of the barn because Lewis never yells at her when she does something wrong, he just explains how to do it right. Besides, using the swede saw and the pitchfork is part of learning to farm.

There's so much to learn, so many kinds of education.

Chapter Five

During the night fresh snow falls and the morning sky is the soft blue of wet watercolor paint. It's still ten degrees below freezing and cold air clings to the valley, reluctant to give way. Yet a new scent in the air and an almost palpable quickening in the earth speak of persistent ferment of bud and seed waiting to burst forth.

Lewis tramps into Callie's bedroom, shrinking it to half its size. "I'm going to Millburn. Want to come?"

She and Lewis harness Dolly and Dinah and hitch them to the cutter. It's just a box on runners and some people call it a caboose, but 'cutter' sounds better. Across the front is a window with a slit underneath for the reins. On the floor is a tiny wood heater, the chimney sticking up through the roof. The front seat, padded with blankets, holds two people; the back bench is for groceries. Both doors have windows, small round holes with jam tin lids fastened by a nail at the top. To look out, all she has to do is slide the lid to one side. If it were really cold, they'd wrap oven-heated rocks in burlap to keep their feet snug.

Dolly, a bay, is the matriarch. She nips Dinah to remind her who is boss, tosses her head and starts off. Dinah obediently keeps pace, her roan hide the color of the crust on butterscotch pudding. Jake watches from the gate, left to his job of guarding the farm.

The new snow sparkles as the horses move steadily along the rutted trail, their hooves crunching on ice beneath, the sled runners squeaking. The little airtight stove spews heat and the sharp tang of wood smoke. It's two hours to Millburn, eight miles away, and Lewis won't let the mares trot. If the cutter tipped over, the heater might set fire to it and make the horses panic.

Lewis likes horses better than machines. When she was six, he'd bought a black Model A Ford. The first time he drove up to the garage doors, he forgot about the brake and was still yelling "Whoa!" as he crashed through them. She'd loved riding in that car except for feeling sick every time. Lewis said she'd be all right if she was driving but her legs weren't long enough to reach the pedals. Maybe he'll let her drive the three-ton Fargo on the road this summer instead of just in the field.

After a mile or so, she says, "I'd like to dig up some young willows by the spring and plant them along the east side of the garden. The hill wouldn't look so bare with trees there."

A pause. "Don't think they'd do well. Willows need plenty of water."

It's true she's seen them only along the creek and the spring. "But wouldn't they grow just about anywhere?"

Lewis shakes his head. "Some plants will. Some won't. You could force them by hand-watering, but they'd still likely be scrawny and miserable."

She doesn't want that. "Then I'll just plant one and see how it does compared with those by the spring."

Her mind drifts back to the problem of religion. "I don't want to go to church and be confirmed."

"It won't kill you. And it will please your mother."

When it comes to the farm Lewis is boss, but he leaves decisions about the house and Callie to Lillian.

"But swearing I believe in God will be a lie."

Lewis clucks to the horses. "Lying is bad business and I don't hold with it. A white lie that saves people's feelings is all right though."

"Mom doesn't care how I feel."

After a moment, he says, "She does her duty by you, the same as she does by me. You don't want to forget that."

He does his duty, too, working hard so they can have food and clothes. "She gets mad at you sometimes."

"She's not happy living out in the bush. And she's got a reason for laying into me."

"What?"

"Water under the bridge years ago. When you're grown up maybe she'll tell you."

That means she'll have to wait till she's twenty-one. Lillian says that's when people are grown up. Knowing the truth about everything is going to take so long.

Why are lies meant to save someone's feelings called white lies? White means purity and lies aren't pure.

Maybe Lewis will retell the story of how he quit the railroad in March 1929 to go homesteading because he knew a depression was coming. He bought a hay wagon and four horses at Hythe, where the railroad ended, and drove the wagon a hundred and thirty miles over a rough trail to land he'd filed on at Poplar Ridge. Russell said it took six days and when they crossed the Peace River, the ice creaked. What if they'd gone through the ice and drowned? If that had happened, she wouldn't have been born.

No, she'll ask something else. It's hard to tell if he wants to talk any more. He was shell-shocked in the first World War and sometimes, when he's silent for days, Lillian says he's thinking about the horrible things that happened. His craggy face, bristling with salt and pepper stubble, is calm, the felt hat tipped low over his eyes.

"Dad, where did your dad and granddad come from?"

"What do you want to know for?"

"I want to know about my ancestors."

"No, you don't. They were all horse thieves."

Sounds like that's the end of the conversation. She doesn't believe his people were all horse thieves, though it would be kind of interesting if they were.

They turn west onto the main road to Millburn. Still five miles to go. Much as she likes George's store and collecting the mail, riding in the cutter gets monotonous. She'll set her mind to something else.

Rory Calhoun, with dark hair and gray eyes and a smile that makes her thrill all over, asks her to go hunting. She wears real cowboy boots and a cowboy hat, and he says she looks good. So does he, but she doesn't know how to tell him, so she smiles instead.

She brings a lunch: fresh bread, sharp Cheddar, and cold sausages. With Remington 30-06 rifles in the saddle scabbards, they follow a game trail while Rory tells her about his cattle ranch. He wants to build a bigger house, with running water and a veranda across the front.

She imagines doing the wash in Rory's house, water rushing into the tub from a tap and, later, gurgling away down a pipe. He'll have power, too, and she can use an electric iron instead of flatirons heated on the stove. Every day she'll ride out to the range with his dinner and every day he'll smile at her.

Rory helps her dismount. He bends his head and kisses her until she's breathless. She

knows he's ready to ask her a certain question. He seats her on a log and kneels beside her, holding her hand in both of his. "Callie…"

"Whoa!" Her whole body is tingling, and she glances at Lewis, afraid he's noticed something, but he gets out and ties the reins to a hitching post. George's General Store looks terrible, paint fading, the back sagging in one corner, an old truck sitting beside the gas pump. The front part of the store, rebuilt after the fire, still hasn't been painted.

The store is a jumble of everything from apples to shingle nails and a tantalizing mishmash of smells. Tobacco, a wheel of Ontario cheddar, fabric, rubber boots, harness leather, wood smoke from the heater, McIntosh apples, engine oil. The best part is the big cardboard box library that holds mostly westerns and mysteries.

She kneels and shoves Edgar Allan Poe's stories under a pile of grubby, dog-eared books she's already read. Ah, here's a new paperback. On the cover a man in a white coat gazes into the eyes of a woman in a nurse's uniform. He's holding both her hands.

"Go get the mail," Lewis calls from the counter. "I'm about through here."

She slips the book inside her parka. If she's careful, Lillian will never catch her reading it.

The post office is in Mrs. Weyburn's house, up rickety wooden steps. The door has a post office sign and, when it's opened, a bell that rings. The room is musty, dark, and covered with yellowed, flyspecked notices. Behind the grilled window is a rack of pigeonholes for the mail.

She waits for the postmistress to come, reminding herself she's not supposed to stare at people. Mrs. Weyburn is all beige, with fading sandy hair pulled into a tight knot, beige skin, and dull beige dresses. The three large wens on her chin have hair growing out of them.

Mrs. Weyburn shuffles in from the back and pulls everything out of the M slot. She hands the mail through the window and actually smiles for once. Callie flees, torn between fear and laughter. Mrs. Weyburn is toothless, her mouth a gaping hole. She looks exactly like a witch.

Itching to get at her returned assignments, Callie helps Lillian unpack boxes of groceries while Lewis tends to the horses. "Can I open the envelope from Victoria?"

"No. I'll open it; I want to see your marks."

"But it's my mail, it's addressed to me!"

"It's not private mail; it's your schoolwork, which I have a right to see. Now do as you're told." Lillian, mouth turned down at the corners, stokes the fire in the stove and fills the kettle from the pail on the wash bench.

"It's not fair! I'd show you the lessons."

Lillian turns, face flushed. "Don't you dare be angry with me! I've fed and clothed and looked after you since you were born and don't forget it. If you were a properly grateful little girl, you'd be only too happy to do as I tell you. And you wouldn't answer back or ask silly questions, either."

Callie retreats, hot tears scalding her eyes. She sits at her table with a history book open. Lillian could come in and accuse her of sulking. Crying isn't allowed either. She clenches her teeth, and the tears recede. Lillian never listens to anything she says so she

just won't talk.

"Tea's ready," Lillian calls. Lewis is dipping a peanut butter cookie into his tea.

"Have a cookie," Lillian says when Callie sits down.

"No thanks." Sharing chilly cheese sandwiches with Lewis on the way back from Millburn had been fun but she's not eating cookies with Lillian.

"A piece of cake, then."

"No thanks, I'm not hungry."

"Don't be silly. Growing girls are always hungry."

"I'm not hungry right now."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, have some cake. What do you think I go to all the work of making it for?"

Lewis's frown accentuates the hollows in his cheeks. "Leave the kid alone. If she doesn't want to eat, she doesn't have to. Where'd you put the mail?"

Lillian brings the envelopes from the front room table and puts them beside Lewis's cup and saucer.

"You open them," he says. Maybe he's letting Lillian have that privilege to make up for interfering.

Lillian chooses the large brown envelope from Victoria first, pulls out three assignments and looks at the first page of each. "Ninety-eight per cent, ninety-six, one hundred. Very good, Callie."

Callie puts the assignments beside her cup and leans her elbow on them, satisfied, her record of As unbroken.

Lillian hands a typewritten letter to Lewis, who reads it and rubs his hand over his head. "We'd better get a decent crop this year. Haven't paid last year's land taxes yet and already the government's talking about this year's."

Lillian fans herself with a magazine. "We shouldn't have to pay land taxes at all. The government doesn't do anything for us. No power, no telephone, no water or sewers. They don't even maintain the roads."

"Hell and damnation, they have to get money from somewhere to pay all those people in Ottawa and Victoria." When he comes back from the front room with his pipe and tobacco pouch, his voice is calm again. "If I have to, I can do road work to pay off the taxes."

"We'll just have to keep a stiff upper lip and hope for the best," Lillian says. She opens a small envelope. "It's from Dot. She says Kjell got his discharge from the Army and wants to try farming."

Lewis grunts. "Any more tea?"

"She asks if there's land available around here."

Of course there is. Nobody lives in Herron Valley except the McKenzies. Callie imagines a new house down the road or across the creek, new ploughed fields. More people demanding to know what she's doing or where she's going, then telling her she's not supposed to.

It's exciting, though. She's never met Aunt Dorothy or Uncle Kjell, or Kjell's son Dag. They live in Medicine Hat, hundreds of miles away. Dag is twelve so he probably won't be as awful as Cathleen's horrible little boys.

"He can get land under the VLA," Lewis says. "There's talk Indian Affairs is going to turn the reserve west of Millburn over to the VLA for veterans."

"I hope they settle close by," Lillian says. "It's been twenty-seven years since I saw Dot."

Lillian says lots of English girls married soldiers they met during the war. Aunt Dorothy didn't. She came to Canada a few years later to teach in Medicine Hat, and married Kjell Rasmussen there. His first wife had died, and Dag was only two when Dorothy became his stepmother.

"Not too close," Lewis says. "You women will spend all your time gabbing."

"That's not true! When did I ever neglect my duties?"

Lewis winks at Callie.

Lillian says, "Oh, you!"

Lewis heads for the back shed. "Tell her there's lots of land around here. While you're at it, write and tell Peter, too. He'd be better off working the land than fooling around with books and his damn stargazing."

She knows Lewis only went to grade four in school. Which is most important, education or having your own land? She can't bear the thought of choosing between them like Peter did. There must be a way to have both.

There are two cookies left on the plate. "Eat those up," Lillian says, "I don't want to put them away."

"I'm not hungry," Callie says and goes into her room, smiling as she hears Lillian slam the cookie tin back into the cupboard.

After the supper dishes are done, Lillian says, "Come into the bedroom. I've got something for you."

Is the something good or bad? Callie leans against the doorway while Lillian opens the dark blue, metal trunk she uses as storage space for linen. She removes the top tray, kneels, and rummages through sheets, towels, and tablecloths, stirring up a faint whiff of dried lavender. From the far corner, she pulls out a tiny brown book with *Book of Common Prayer* etched on the front cover.

"This is the prayer book I was given when I was confirmed. You can borrow it to learn the catechism."

The cover feels like real leather. She lifts the book to her nose. It smells like leather, too, beneath that sharp mustiness that tells of long storage. Inside, the thin pages are packed with small, fine print.

"You don't have to read it all, though it certainly wouldn't do you any harm." Lillian closes the trunk. "Here, I'll find the catechism for you. The more you can learn before you go for lessons, the better."

When Lillian marks the page with the faded brown ribbon marker, a photograph in sepia tones falls out. A young woman stands before a stone church. She wears a white dress that comes to her ankles and a wide-brimmed white hat decorated with flowers. Her gloved hands hold a small book.

"Who is this?" Callie asks.

"Why, that's me!"

"You look so slim."

"Well, I was slim once. Before I had you." Her waspish tone is a warning. She takes

the snapshot, and her face softens. "That's the church we went to in Willingale."

"Why were you taking a prayer book to church?" The only church she's ever been in had them in all the pews.

"Anyone who's been properly brought up and educated has his or her own prayer book. The ones in the church are for the lower classes, who don't have that advantage." Lillian's using her 'England is the garden of civilization' voice.

Callie looks at the photograph again. It's hard to imagine that Lillian doing anything except lifting a teacup or strolling in a garden. Callie glances down at her dirty running shoes and scruffy jeans. The garden of civilization seems a million miles away. Which is just as well; she'd feel silly wearing a frothy white dress and big hat.

"On second thought," Lillian says, reverting to her tired voice, "I'll give you the book. I doubt if I'll ever get the chance to use it again." She holds her hand out for the snapshot. "When that was taken, I never dreamed I'd end up in this godforsaken country."

Callie takes the book, wishing it was about flowers. Better yet, myths, like the one Edith Hamilton wrote.

Wait a minute. Maybe it is.

Chapter Six

At the kitchen table, Lewis cradles his cup in gnarled hands and stares out at the hilly pasture where late April sunshine scours the last stubborn patches of snow from shadowed gullies. Callie basks in the morning light streaming across the oilcloth, worrying at chips in the coating with a thumbnail and dreaming of new green growth.

"If we can start seeding in mid-May," Lewis says, "we might get the crop off before it freezes."

The last two years, hard frosts in August brought small, shriveled grain, the doughy kernels damaged before they could harden to full maturity. The elevators pay almost nothing for frozen wheat.

"But we've had frost in June before," Lillian says. "If the crop freezes when it's just coming up, we won't get anything either." Her voice is tired, as though a summer frost has already come and blighted her life.

Lewis holds out his cup for more coffee. "I can get the garden ready in a couple of weeks."

"It's too bad someone hasn't found a way to control the weather," Lillian says.

The valley's black soil can grow almost anything during the north's long summer days, but rain must come at the right time and the nights remain frost-free from the end of May to the first of September. It's always a worry what each day will bring — sun, cloud, rain, snow, hail, frost, dust blowing in the wind. But things that grow underground, like potatoes, turnips, and onions, will always keep them fed.

Maybe if she talks about something else, Lillian will stop looking sour and Lewis will quit worrying. "Why didn't Aunt Dorothy have children of her own?" she asks Lillian.

"I don't know!" Lillian sounds irritated. Maybe she really doesn't know and thinks Dorothy should have told her. Or she knows but won't tell. Or she's tired of questions.

"She was getting a little long in the tooth when she got married," Lewis says.

That sounds as though teeth keep growing longer as you get older. But with horses anyway, the gums shrink, so the teeth just look longer. Lewis says that's why you have to look in a horse's mouth to tell how old it is.

"She's only forty-two," Lillian says. "She could still have children."

Last summer Callie had asked Lillian what it felt like to be fifty and got her head bitten off. Lewis is sixty-three but he doesn't seem to mind. He says dying is natural for men and animals and plants and nobody should be sad about it because new ones are always being born.

As if he's read her mind, Lewis says, "When I die, I want to be buried in a plain pine box up in the pasture."

Lillian's eyes widen. "You can't do that!"

"Why not? I don't want any fuss."

"It's not right. You must be buried properly."

"I can do anything I want with my land."

"You have to be buried in a graveyard," Lillian insists. "What would people think?"

"Once I'm dead, I won't care what anybody thinks."

"You don't care now!"

Lewis knocks the dottle from his pipe and goes out to grease the seed drill. He's eager

to get on the land and won't look at his elk skeleton again until the snow flies. He likes work; he's always in a better mood in the summer.

Callie heads for the shed.

"Where are you going?" Lillian's waspish voice.

"I want to dig up a little willow from along the spring and transplant it to the hill above the garden."

"What on earth for?"

"To see if it will grow where the ground is dry."

Lillian's face is flushed. "That's silly nonsense and I forbid it. You'll just make a mess of it, anyway, like you did with those beans you planted. Only one of those pots has any sprouts coming up."

Callie opens her mouth to say that the bean experiment was a success, then shuts it again. Lillian will be even angrier if she realizes the bean planting wasn't meant for growing food. As for the willow, she can do that some day when Lillian is too busy to notice.

Lillian says, "I mean it. Those willows belong where they are. And you belong in the house, doing your lessons and helping me."

"I'll just go for a walk then."

"All right, but be back here in half an hour." Lillian slams a saucepan on the stove.

Callie climbs the pasture hill, Jake ranging ahead. Rosie and Buck stand beside the pink salt lick Lewis put out a couple of weeks ago. They've already hollowed a curve in it with their rough tongues. The horses use it, too. How do animals know they need salt?

On top of the hill, in the southeast corner of the pasture, she finds a level area that would do for a grave. Lewis says everybody's the same when they're six feet under, so it would have to be six feet deep. Seven feet long because Lewis is tall, and three feet wide. Digging such a big hole with a shovel would take a long time.

She sits on a flat-topped boulder and eyes the site. Why can't he be buried here if that's what he wants? It's nobody else's business. She'll have to help him because Lillian seems dead set against it. Is it really so awful to be buried on your own land?

She has a sudden vision of Lewis, his flesh melted away to a skeleton like the elk bones in the lean-to. Shivering, she zips up her jacket.

She sees herself digging in winter, first building a fire to thaw the earth. No, summer would be better. Bring a tape measure and mark out the area, then pile the earth to one side. But Rosie or one of the horses might fall in the hole and break a leg.

Burying Lewis in the pasture isn't simple after all. But he'll live for years and years yet and sometime she'll ask him how it should be done.

The boulder feels cool under her fingers and the mica chips embedded in the granite glitter dully in the sunlight. Lewis says a glacier retreated through this valley eons ago. If she knew the right magic, the rock might speak and tell her its history. Kneeling, she looks at the rock. Does it know she's here? Not likely.

A flash of yellow catches her eye. Beside the rock is a buttercup, barely two inches high, golden petals shining as if varnished. She caresses them with the tips of her fingers and Jake noses them, puzzled by her interest in something inedible. The yellow petals seem to give off their own light, like pieces of the sun fallen to earth.

She scans the area, but no more fallen sunlight gleams in the brown grass. She must find more; she needs one for her scrapbook. There are none here, though. She climbs

through the barbed wire fence and ranges southward.

Not until she finds a cluster of buttercups in a sunny, sheltered patch near the lake does she realize it's close to noon; the sun has almost reached its zenith. Hell and damnation, Lillian will skin her alive!

She walks toward home, one buttercup clutched in her hand. The sweet tangy odor of damp earth and rotting stubble rises in the heat of the sun and the pale leaf buds on gray poplar branches are growing fat. Soon the whole valley will be bursting with lush green growth and busy birds.

Down the hill on the garden side of the spring, she snaps off several branches of pussy willow to make a bouquet for Lillian. It might help.

Lillian's scalding words are silenced by Lewis coming in for dinner, but Callie's stomach is still queasy when she goes to her room. It doesn't matter, though. Getting a perfect buttercup is worth two of Lillian's tirades.

The way things are going, it'll be August before she finishes grade seven, almost time to start again. But being late is partly her own fault. Yesterday's history chapter was so dull she'd put it aside and written more of the Amazon fairy story. The Black Witch is eating birds' eggs and the fairies are setting a trap for her.

In the kitchen, Lillian says to Lewis, "You forgot to get me a pail of lard when you went to the store."

"Did you put it on the list?" he asks.

"I most certainly did."

Callie is not going to get caught in the middle of this, not for any money. She knows lard wasn't on the list; she'd read it on the way to Millburn. Lillian is never wrong and if you catch her in a mistake, she's mad for days, so knowing the truth about the lard isn't worth much.

"I'm not driving to Millburn for one pail of lard," Lewis says. "Send the kid. She'd better take Dolly, though. That horse of hers is in heat."

What does 'in heat' mean?

"I wouldn't worry about that," Lillian says, "nobody along the road owns a stallion."

Callie almost stops breathing. If she's quiet, maybe Lillian will say something that will help her figure out what's wrong with Silver.

"Callie! Get your boots on."

She leads Silver from the barn to the chopping block beside the woodpile. Mounting properly means jumping up and lying across the horse on her stomach, then getting her right leg over while she hangs onto the mane. But she doesn't have enough spring in her legs to jump that high. She steps onto the chopping block and the mare dances away. Shortening her grip on the halter rope, she makes Silver walk around again.

Third time lucky. She settles on the mare's white back and Silver heads for the barn. Callie has to turn her several times before she gives in and walks through the gate and down the road. Life would be a lot easier with a bridle and saddle. She could mount from the ground, like a real cowgirl, and make Silver do what she's told. It's impossible to control a horse with just a halter.

Now that the snow is gone, the road is a thin layer of greasy gumbo over still half-

frozen ground beneath. The sun hides behind hazy clouds and the fields are muddy and disheveled. If the weather stays fair, though, the road will soon be dry enough for the truck.

Silver tries to head for home half a dozen times before Callie wrestles her the eight miles to George's General Store. Callie's legs are stiff when she slides off the mare's back. She's already dreading the ordeal of climbing back on.

George writes out the bill for the lard. "You're getting to be a good-looking young woman, Callie."

Blood rushes to her cheeks and she dips her head to sign the bill.

"Say hello to your Dad for me and tell him I ordered his pipe tobacco. I'll never forget how hard he worked helping me rebuild after the fire." George turns toward the stock room behind the store.

In the cardboard box library, she finds a new Luke Short western, then slips the doctor and nurse love story back into the pile. It was good; she likes it when everybody lives happily ever after.

The post office witch looks less witchy than usual; she's wearing a green dress. She hands over two letters with English stamps for Lillian and a small brown paper parcel from the T. Eaton Company. It can't be her brassiere, not yet. They only mailed the order a few days ago. 'Brassiere' is an odd word. It should have something to do with brass but doesn't.

Callie heads back across the road and looks for something to help her climb on Silver. No luck. She'll have to use George's porch and hope he doesn't see her.

The moment Callie's mounted, knapsack slung on her back, Silver breaks into a trot. The can of lard bounces against Callie's spine like a battering ram. It takes half a mile and the steep rise of a hill before she's able to rein the mare to a walk. Callie eases the strap over her head and rests the knapsack on Silver's neck.

At the top of the hill, behind what Mr. Sutherland calls his 'bobwire' fence, a glossy black horse whinnies. Silver pricks up her ears. As the distance between them narrows, the black runs back and forth along the fence, tail plumed out behind him. Silver whickers and prances and Callie kicks the mare's flanks to keep her moving.

Silver rises on her hind legs and Callie slides over her rump, landing with a jarring thud in the muddy road, the knapsack beside her. She blinks tears of pain from her eyes and sees Silver heading straight for the black horse.

Callie gets to her feet and edges toward the mare, pretending to ignore the dangling halter rope. "Good girl, Silver. Good girl, stand still."

Silver nuzzles and nickers with the black, paying no attention. Callie reaches for the halter rope. The black whirls, dances a few feet away and then rushes the fence. Over he comes, mane flying, almost on top of Callie.

She grabs for the rope, but Silver jerks away and trots up the road, the black horse nipping at her flanks. At the point of tears, Callie trudges after them.

"I wouldn't get too close if I was you."

Mr. Sutherland, on his bay mare, leans down to open the gate, then rides out onto the road, a small pail of oats in one hand. "That's my stallion," he said. "Got him a week ago. Name's Thunder."

Mr. Sutherland has hazel eyes in a nice wrinkled brown face but he's not smiling. He's probably mad because the stallion got out. Callie looks at the two horses prancing around

each other, nipping and squealing.

"Did you know that mare's in heat?" he asks.

"Yes, but I don't know what it means."

Mr. Sutherland looks surprised. He spits into the brown grass. "You watch now and you'll find out."

The stallion rears up on his hind legs toward Silver's back. Callie sees, with astonishment, that his pee thing has grown long. Silver prances away but the next time he rises, she lowers her head, braces her front legs, and moves sideways beneath him. The stallion's pee thing slides into the long slit under her tail, right below her poop hole. The two holes look like an upside-down exclamation mark.

"Well, now, supposing your mare has a foal, it'll be half mine, right?" His smile is teasing.

Callie stares at the sweating horses. She'd thought that slit under the mare's tail was just for peeing.

"Is that how a colt gets started?"

"Your folks never tell you the facts of life? Those horses are mating and there might be a foal. Or might not." Silver and Thunder have separated and are now cropping old grass. Mr. Sutherland dismounts and hands Callie the reins. "You hold my mare while I catch yours."

Men have pee things, too. She'd caught Russell peeing behind the barn once. He'd told her to bugger off and hid his pee thing with his hand so it's not big, but maybe it gets bigger, like Thunder's. If that's how babies get made, she doesn't need to worry about touching herself Down There.

All Callie can think about as she heads home is what the stallion did to Silver. Lillian says she's too young to know the facts of life. But how can you know what to expect or decide what to do if you don't have all the facts?

Does Lewis do to Lillian what the stallion did to Silver? Is that what's happening when their bed creaks?

She gives Silver a drink at the top spring barrel and puts her in the barn. She has two secrets now. She knows how foals are made and Silver might have one.

As she turns to leave, a lean gray cat with tattered ears streaks down the ladder and out the door. Martha is sitting in the loft, beside the ladder. Maybe that gray cat did the same thing to Martha as Thunder did to Silver. If Martha has kittens Lewis will drown them. But maybe there won't be any kittens; maybe she doesn't have to worry.

If Silver has a foal, Lillian and Lewis will know something happened and make her tell. It's not fair that they never tell her anything, though. She doesn't want to wait until she's grown up to find out the truth about life.

The parcel from Eaton's turns out to be dress material, a pale pink and white candy stripe that Lillian says will become Callie's dress for confirmation classes.

Oh, not pink! That's what babies wear.

Lillian hands her the pattern envelope. The dress has a Peter Pan collar and little puffed sleeves. She doesn't want anything that frilly. "Why can't I wear slacks and a shirt? I'd be more comfortable."

"Don't be ridiculous! It isn't done."

She doesn't care if it isn't done, she wants to do it. Maybe other people who don't like wearing dresses will be glad she's doing things her own way. "What difference does it make what you wear to church?"

Lillian grabs the pattern. "Is that all the thanks I get for making you a pretty dress?" She bundles up the material. "You'll wear it whether you like it or not."

Callie escapes up the steep attic stairs and gazes out the north window. Cloud fire burns bright, deep rose edged in fiery gold. She opens the window to the cooling air and leans out. In the west, long cloud tails lie against the luminous pearly sky, undersides pink and peach. Like the marble fireplace in the magazine.

By the fire is a woman in a deep armchair. Callie sits on the floor, leaning against the woman's knees. The woman strokes Callie's hair. "What will you wear to church?"

"A long full skirt in deep rose, gold slippers and cloud fire wrapped around my shoulders like a shawl."

"That sounds lovely. We'll make all that tomorrow. It's time for bed now, my darling." The woman rises and wraps her in tender arms, kisses her forehead.

She turns away from the window and the darkening sky. Sky dreams and cloud fire dreams are beautiful. But sometimes they make her feel sad.

There won't be any gold slippers, not even white ones. She'll have to wear her only pair of 'good' shoes, a pair of black oxfords. Old lady shoes. Lillian shoes.

Chapter Seven

The last tattered remnants of snow melt into the mud and midday temperatures rise to sixty degrees Fahrenheit. At night, though, the mercury sometimes still drops as low as twenty-five and frost glitters on the barn roof at dawn. Fir branches sport new growth at the tips, pale, delicate green with a silvery tinge; poplar, birch, and aspen unfold tender jade leaves to the sun.

Every day, Callie and Lewis walk down the road to the oat field or across the creek to the wheat field and take a few paces into the plowed earth, each furrow fringed with the washed-out yellow stubble of last year's crop. The gumbo sucks at their rubber boots and Lewis shakes his head.

By Sunday, May fourth, the road is dry. Lewis gasses up the Fargo grain truck from one of the gas barrels beside the workshop, changes the oil and checks the tires. Callie washes last fall's mud off the green cab.

From the back step, Lillian calls, "You two come in and get cleaned up. Sunday is a day of rest."

What if you don't feel like resting? Suppose you want to work on Sunday and rest on Monday?

"We'd better go in," Lewis says. "Your mother sets a lot of store by Sundays."

She can tell he doesn't care one way or the other. For her, the best thing about Sunday is the big dinner, at one o'clock instead of noon like the rest of the week.

Today's will be roast chicken. Early this morning, Lewis lopped the head off a fat old hen on the chopping block by the woodpile, something she doesn't ever want to do. The body leapt around on the ground, blood dripping from the neck. It looked awful but Lewis said the hen didn't suffer, that it was just the final nerve impulses moving the dead body. Would Lillian's body do that if someone chopped her head off?

While coffee brews, Lewis hones his razor on the leather strop, brushes sweet, soapy foam on his face and scrapes at a week's growth of stubble. Lillian takes a lemon meringue pie from the oven and puts it in the shed to cool. The golden-brown meringue is two inches thick, with beads of moisture gleaming in the folds.

Callie watches sunlight filter through the rising steam of her coffee and wonders which smell is best: coffee, shaving soap, or lemon. She dips an oatmeal cookie into the coffee and raises it toward her mouth.

"Don't do that!" Lillian's no-nonsense voice. "It's not polite."

Lillian's rules take the fun out of everything. Why is it rude to dunk a cookie? She's careful not to let it drip on anything.

The sound of a motor, the first on the road in months, launches her to her feet. First into the front room, she presses her nose against the window.

A dark blue pickup truck pulls off the road and Russell climbs out to open the gate.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," Lillian says, pleasure creasing her face into a smile, "it's Russell and Rita. And someone with them." Lillian bustles into the kitchen. "One chicken won't be enough; we'll have it for supper. Go get some potatoes and two jars of deer meat from the cellar."

"But I want to go out and see them."

"Do as you're told. Nobody's interested in what you have to say, anyway."

Blinking away angry tears, she grabs the flashlight and descends into darkness. She'll stay down here until they come looking for her. She'll tell Russell that Lillian makes her stay in the cellar all the time.

Something brushes against her face and she jumps back, fear raising sweat on her palms, her scream catching in her throat and coming out as a squeak. She raises her arm to shield her face, aiming the flashlight upward.

Only a cobweb.

The boards Lewis put down to cover a damp spot creak under her feet as she goes to the potato bin and fills the chipped enamel basin.

Above her head, Lillian calls, "While you're at it, bring up some beet pickles."

How many arms does Lillian think she has? And she hates beet pickles. They're horrid. She thumps up the cellar steps and dumps her harvest on the kitchen table. She can see Lewis and her brother through the shed window. Rita and the stranger must be close by. She's almost out the back door before Lillian catches her.

"Peel those potatoes before you go running away."

The back door opens, and everyone crowds into the shed, taking off boots and hanging up coats.

Russell strides into the kitchen. "Well, if it ain't my baby sister." He's so good at swinging his stiff leg she rarely notices he doesn't walk quite like other people. He gives her a gentle punch on the upper arm.

"That hurt!" She balls up her fist and hits him hard in the stomach. It feels like she's broken her hand; his belly is like steel.

"Ho! Gonna get sassy, are you?" he says with a mock growl, feinting at her face and midriff, quick short chops that force her backward across the kitchen. She gets through his guard and bops him on the chin.

Russell lifts her by the waist and thumps her against the wall. She slides down and falls on her knees, pretending to be more winded than she is.

"That will do," Lillian says in her frostiest English accent. "Russell, you know better than to fight in the house. And Callie, you know better than to aggravate him."

Russell helps her up, his hands firm and warm on her arms. She wishes she were as strong as he is. He cuffs Lillian on the shoulder and says, "Is the coffee pot on, Ma? You make the best coffee in the world."

"Go on with you!" Lillian's smile, bright as sunrise, is still there when she turns to the stove.

Everyone sits at the kitchen table and Callie realizes the stranger is Uncle Kjell from Medicine Hat. She tries not to stare. His eyes are crossed, and she can't tell which eye is looking where. He's bigger than he seemed in the murky photographs Aunt Dorothy used to send, as tall as Lewis, but broader in the shoulders and solidly fleshed. Kjell's red plaid shirt is identical to Lewis's except it's new, the colors still bright. She's surprised Kjell has sandy hair and hazel eyes. Lillian says he's Danish and she'd thought all Scandinavians had blue eyes and pale blond hair but maybe looks aren't quite that cut and dried.

"You up here to look at land, Kjell?" Lewis asks.

Lewis calls him by name. Russell must have introduced them out there by the truck. She and Lillian didn't get introduced. But Kjell knows who they are.

"That's right. We heard there's plenty available around here." Kjell's voice rumbles gently, like a cat purring, and his words are slow, as if he has all the time in the world to

say them. He pauses and she finds herself leaning forward, eager for him to get the words out. "Decided I'd better come and have a look."

Russell says, "Figured I'd show him that half section kitty-corner to the southwest corner of your place, the one I was going to file on before my leg got smashed."

Russell acts like he never thinks about the steel plate in his knee. He's good-looking when he laughs, the way his mouth curves and his eyes twinkle. What makes men different from women? What makes Russell walk the way he does, slapping his feet down on the ground like he owns it?

"What branch were you in?" Kjell asks. "I don't recall Dorothy saying."

"Navy. Joined up as a stoker in 1939."

"I was Army. A mechanic, same as before the war."

"There's no water on that half section," Lewis says.

"You ever get it witched?" Kjell asks Russell.

"No. I was planning to put a house here beside the folks'. There's a spring, good water, runs all year round."

"That's a mighty fine thing to have." Kjell turns to give Lillian a smile. "You make good coffee."

She beams. "You'll have dinner before you go look at that land. And come back for supper."

Callie scrapes the carrots Lillian has put in front of her, listening to the men talk. Land, crops, cattle, the rumors of India gaining independence from Britain. Russell opens a flat tin box of Exports and lights one. Tobacco smoke smells so good.

Russell stands up. "Don't rush dinner, Ma. We'll go look at that half section now."

Lillian says, "Lewis, before you go, kill another chicken for me."

"Mom, can I go with them?"

"Don't be silly," Lillian says. "Looking at land is men's business."

"But if I'm going to be a farmer, I need to know about things like that."

Lillian snaps, "You are not going to be a farmer!" She sees Rita looking at her and her voice drops back to its normal level. "Your father was very foolish to put that nonsense in your head."

"There's not enough here to feed those men dinner," Lillian says. "Callie, go down cellar and get me another jar of deer meat and a few more potatoes."

She allows herself a brief Rory Calhoun fantasy while she gets the food. She and Rory will both work outside on the cattle ranch, and they'll have a housekeeper. Electric lights in the cellar and an indoor toilet, too.

As Callie comes up the stairs, she hears her mother say, "Yes, it is a shame. Kjell would be quite a handsome man if his eyes weren't crossed."

She's no sooner put the potatoes on the bench, when Lillian says, "You can pluck those two chickens for supper. The water in the kettle is about the right temperature."

Hell and damnation! She plops a chicken neck first into a bucket and pours the hot water over it.

"Get on with it now," Lillian says. "Don't leave the bird in the water too long like you did last time. You know the skin tears when it gets too soft."

Callie goes into the shed, holding her nose against the stench of hot feathers. Spreading a newspaper on the workbench, she starts plucking. The wet feathers cling to her hand and she has to keep brushing them off.

She hears Lillian say, "Don't you think it's about time you gave me a grandchild?"

"In a while," Rita says. "If I work another couple of years, we'll be able to get a house big enough for kids."

"In my day, wives didn't have to work. I'm sure if you persuaded Russell to economize a little, you'd be able to stay home and raise your babies."

"But we'll get a new house faster if I work and, anyway, I like my job."

"It isn't right for a married woman to go out to work. I'm surprised Russell allows it. And it's better to have your children when you're young."

Callie wonders if she'll ever have children. It's not something she's thought about much. It might be all right, but the few babies she's seen were as ho-hum as housework. And changing diapers must be worse than plucking chickens.

She stuffs the damp newspaper and feathers into the airtight heater and wrinkles her nose. Burning feathers smell worse than wet ones. Lillian singes the pin feathers off the chicken carcasses with the lit end of rolled newspaper. It's easier than plucking but Lillian won't let her do it in case she burns the skin.

"The lemon pie will do for supper," Lillian says, "but I don't have any dessert for dinner."

"I could make a Brown Betty," Rita says.

"That's a good idea. Callie, run down cellar and bring me up six or seven apples. And I'll do it, Rita. This is your day off and you should be resting."

Callie picks the firmest McIntosh apples in the wooden crate and wonders about Lillian's thinking. She says Sunday is a day of rest, but she never rests. Rita can cook really well, but Lillian won't let her.

When the Brown Betty is almost done, the kitchen smelling of cinnamon, nutmeg and cloves, Callie hears men's voices in the yard.

"They're here!" From the shed window she can see them standing beside Russell's pickup talking, sometimes pointing across the valley to the west, then to the north, sometimes shifting their feet and looking at the ground. Russell hitches up his jeans and adjusts the bulge at the front.

Kjell's jeans are tighter, and his bulge is more prominent. Lewis always wears loose overalls so his never shows. She wishes they'd take their pants down so she can see what they have in there. Their pee things couldn't possibly be as big as the stallion's.

She'd almost seen one when she was five. Ricky, who lived on the next farm at Poplar Ridge, used to come over and play hobby horses with her. One summer afternoon he dared her to climb up on the chicken house. The sun-soaked logs felt smooth and friendly under her hands as she climbed the protruding ends onto the roof. It was like being on top of the world.

"Ricky, I gotta go to the toilet. I'm going down."

"Let's do it up here. Nobody'll see us."

She took down her pants and squatted to pee but Ricky turned his back so she couldn't see what he was doing.

She was pulling her pants up when Lillian yelled from the kitchen door, "Come down from there, you filthy brats!"

Callie crawled down the log ends.

Lillian slapped Ricky. "Get home this minute, you dirty little beggar!" She grabbed Callie by the ear and yanked her forward. "How could you do such a filthy, disgusting thing? You're going to get a thick ear."

Her mother slapped her hard on one ear and she stumbled, her head buzzing, and cried.

She can still feel the sting of Lillian's hard hand. She hadn't known it was disgusting to pee on the chicken house roof. She still doesn't see what's so wrong with it. A little unsanitary, maybe, but the chickens do a lot worse inside their little house. And men pee wherever they like out in the open. The trouble is, they always turn their backs when she's around.

They all sit down at the big table in the front room. There's little room for knives and forks and none for elbows. Lillian piles plates high with mashed potatoes, sliced carrots, deer meat and gravy. She passes Russell the bread. "It's time you started a family."

"Ma, you've seen our house. It's so goddamn small you couldn't swing a cat in it."

Callie winces. She wishes she could stay with Russell and Rita when she goes to town for confirmation classes, but they don't even have a couch for her to sleep on.

"Mind your language," Lillian says. "Babies don't take up much room."

Why is Lillian so keen on Russell and Rita having children? She doesn't seem to enjoy it much herself.

Russell says, "Kids need space. A couple more years and we'll have the money for a bigger house."

Lillian subsides and there is silence, except for cutlery clattering and requests to pass the pepper and salt. After second helpings of Brown Betty and fresh coffee, Lewis leans back and belches. "Best dinner I've had in days."

The others compliment Lillian, too, mentioning each thing she made, and Callie realizes why she didn't want Rita to cook anything. Lillian is the star of every meal.

After dinner, Russell lights a cigarette and says, "Let's go. There's plenty of good land north of here." The men clomp out. The kitchen expands and the vibrations in the air settle down to a calm domestic hum.

From the front room, Callie watches the truck bounce over potholes, aching to be with the men. She could have learned more about soil or looked for new flowers. But Lillian said, "They don't want you around, you'll just get in their way. Now come and wash these dishes."

Callie goes to the water pail on the bench and takes a drink from the small aluminum dipper. The water is cool and fresh, with a faint metallic tang. She'd pour some into the steaming dishpan, but Lillian would tell her she's a baby to be afraid of a little hot water.

When the dishes are done, Rita asks for the Brown Betty recipe. "It's the best I've ever tasted."

Lillian, looking pleased, gets her cookbook. The pages are stained brown with food splatters, and most have been scribbled on. "I never follow a recipe exactly. I'll write it out for you the way I do it."

Will she? Or will she leave something out, so Rita's Brown Betty is never quite as

good? Callie catches Rita's wink and knows Rita doesn't care. She's making conversation so Lillian won't nag her about babies.

"I'll make a spice cake." Lillian gets out her big yellow mixing bowl and a slotted spoon. "One pie won't be enough for supper."

It's a matter of pride with Lillian that no one ever goes hungry in the McKenzie house. But the cake is a good idea. It might mean a second piece of lemon pie for her.

"Get me a couple of eggs, Callie, there's a good girl."

Wondering where the men are now, what they're saying, she fetches two brown eggs from the cracked china bowl in the shed. She holds her hands out to Lillian, palms down, an egg clutched in each. Lillian reaches for one egg and Callie lets go too soon. The egg splatters on the floor. Surprised by the misconnection, her other fist opens and the second egg lands beside the first, the yolks spreading yellow across the linoleum.

"Callie! That's two eggs gone. You're useless."

Swallowing tears, Callie turns toward the shed, but Lillian says, "Just leave it. I'll get them myself. Go do your homework and get out from under my feet."

She opens a geography text, but her mind won't focus. All she can see is the word 'useless' written in big letters on the page. She needs to ask Russell a question. The answer might make it easier to stand up for herself.

In the kitchen, Lillian and Rita are talking babies again. "I wish I had my mother's child-rearing manual to give you when you have the first one," Lillian says. "It's how I raised Russell and he's the best son in the world."

Russell's always been the golden-haired boy.

"I think if you love your kids," Rita says, "they'll turn out all right."

"Love has nothing to do with it." A rhythmic slap of mixing spoon against bowl as Lillian creams butter and sugar together. "Children are just little savages when they're born, and you have to break them to obedience, respect and duty right away. That makes them strong."

"Is that what the book said?" Callie can hear the disbelief in Rita's voice.

"The sooner they learn what a cold, hard place the world is, the better off they'll be."

"They learn that the first time they fall down and hurt themselves."

"You'll see I'm right when you have your own," Lillian says. "Lewis spoiled Callie when she was little, making a fuss over her. I warned him, but he wouldn't listen and now she doesn't show proper respect. Every time I tell her something she questions it."

"Kids are pretty smart," Rita says. "I think they deserve some respect, too."

"Nonsense! That just makes them big-headed."

Some adults don't deserve respect either.

"That book had some good tricks to use with children, Rita. I've used many on Callie. She often feels hard done by, but it's for her own good."

"I'm not going to play tricks on my children." Rita's voice sounds firm.

If Rita were her mother, life would be a lot different. The pain claws at her, brings tears to her eyes.

She shuts her ears to their voices, opens her desk drawer and takes out the Mother's Day card she made a few days ago. It's a folded sheet of writing paper with dried flowers glued on the front. Inside is a verse:

Roses are red, violets are blue,
You're my Mom and I love you.

She'd copied it from the verse Lewis wrote in her autograph book, changing the last line from *'You're my little girl and I love you.'* She couldn't think of anything better. She rips the card into tiny pieces.

Lillian says she's useless. Well, Lillian is wrong. Whatever she decides to do, she'll be brilliant. Everyone will admire and respect her, and no one will think anything of it if she happens to drop an egg on the floor.

She opens *Mythology* and starts rereading the story of Theseus, who was so brave he faced the Minotaur alone and killed it with his bare fists.

The men return at five, filling the tiny kitchen with rumbling talk and the smell of gasoline and cigarette smoke. Lillian moves among them like a fat mother hen trying to herd overgrown chicks.

At supper, Kjell looks at Callie now and then as if he wants to say something. It might be her imagination, though. His voice doesn't sound as if he ever yells at anybody, and it would be nice if he talked to her. But why would he? By the time the meal is over, she's figured out it's his left eye that looks at her; the right one doesn't seem to look at anything.

The supper dishes cleared, Callie and Rita relax on the couch behind Kjell, who is seated at the table, his back to them, smoking a cigarette. Lewis sits in his big chair at the other end of the table, puffing at his pipe. On the far side, Russell is wrong way round on a kitchen chair by the long window, silhouetted against the sun, which is low in the west and casting bronze shadows across the valley bottom.

Lillian brings a tray of juice glasses and a bottle of beet wine glowing like dark fire. "Here's a little treat," she says, and pours a glass for everyone but Callie.

Russell says, "How come the kid doesn't get any?"

"She's too young, and silly enough as it is."

She's not silly, and anyway, beet wine is just as horrid as pickled beets.

The air is crowded with words, the men still talking about the land they looked at northeast of Millburn.

"Some good ground up there," Kjell says, "but I haven't seen anything I like better than this valley."

"Too bad Dot didn't come with you," Lillian says.

"She has to teach until the end of June."

"So." Lewis knocks the ashes out of his pipe into the brass ashtray. "Have you made a decision?"

Kjell nods. "I like that half-section across the creek. Nice situation, good land. I figure we should build on the north end, closest to your place."

"Might have a problem with water," Lewis reminds him.

"We'll drill a well and if that doesn't work, we'll haul it from the creek. Plenty of people have to do that."

Lewis leans forward to get his tobacco can. For a moment the horizontal rays of the sun shine through his thin white hair and brighten his shiny scalp. He fills his pipe, tamping down the tobacco. The flick of a wooden match against the sole of his boot sounds loud, and the flame flares up with a hiss.

He'll be sorry that someone else is moving into the valley. She is, too. It might be fun, though, having relatives so close she can talk to them.

Kjell says he has to go home to Medicine Hat to sell the house. When that's done, he'll come back, buy equipment, and get some land cleared before he starts building.

"If you're quick enough, you might get a crop in this year." Russell lights another cigarette.

"No good seeding past mid-June," Lewis says. "Too much danger of an early frost. Old Walters, over the other side of Millburn, didn't put his in last year until damn near the first of July. Froze so bad in August he got nothing."

Lillian says, "Ha! You know why he was late planting. He was taken with the drink."

"Come on, Ma, you like your little glass of wine." Russell's eyes are twinkling.

"That's different! A glass of wine now and then is perfectly acceptable, but I do not approve of spirits."

"Walters sure likes his rum," Russell says.

"It's disgusting." Lillian wrinkles her nose. "I blame Mrs. Walters. Any decent woman would make sure her husband didn't overindulge."

"That's right." Rita gives Russell a playful jab in the ribs. "If it weren't for us, you men would drink and gamble your lives away."

"You can laugh if you like, but women's influence makes the world a better place." Lillian pushes her chair back. "I'll go make a pot of tea."

"You know how to play crib?" Kjell asks Callie.

"Sure."

"Care to have a game? I bet I can whomp you."

"Bet you can't!" This is better than helping make tea, even if the way his eyes move makes her nervous. She gets the crib board and cards and sits across the corner of the table from him. She wins the deal and scores twenty points on the first hand, pegging with the match sticks Lewis whittled to fit the holes in the board.

"Maybe I should take back my bet," Kjell says. "You were lucky on that hand." His smile is slow and sweet, like thick butterscotch pudding. "But it's a pleasure to play with someone who knows the game."

Callie doesn't know how to answer, but his words make her feel grown-up and smart. She's shuffling the cards for a fourth game when Rita glances at Russell. He stands up and shoves his chair under the table. "Guess we better hit the road before it's too dark to see the mud holes."

Ten minutes later, Kjell is still at the door, complimenting Lillian on her food. Callie follows Russell around to the driver's side of the truck. It's the only chance she's had all day to ask her question.

"Why does Dad walk away when Mom picks on him?"

He gets in the truck and gives her a hard look. "You ever seen Pop lose his temper?"

"No. Well, once, when Mom locked me in the closet."

"Did he hit her?"

A shiver slides down her spine and knots itself in her stomach. "No."

"He beat the shit out of me once, when I was fifteen and figured I knew everything. I made damn sure he never had cause to do it again."

"But…"

Rita leans forward on the seat. "What Russ means is your Dad is afraid he can't

control his temper. So he walks away from a fight."

"Oh." A crack opens in her mind. Roaring flames, shouting, thudding fists. But that can't have anything to do with Lewis. The images fade, the crack closes.

Rita says, "Don't you go talking about it. You can't interfere in how couples work out their problems."

"He takes life real hard," Russell says, shaking his head. "You gotta grow a thick hide to get by in this world, but he never did. Him and his damn bones; they're not going to do him any good."

Before she can ask what he means, Kjell strolls across the yard and gets into the truck. "Here's my champion crib player. Good night, Callie. Sleep tight." His voice sounds as though it's hugging her.

Callie closes the gate behind them, then stands with Jake, waving as the truck heads down the road. She's never thought of Lewis as having a bad temper. It's scary. But he's never shouted at her.

She goes back inside to dry the teacups. There hasn't been this much talk and bustle in the house since last fall and she needs silence to sort it all out. She'd like to stroll up into the pasture and watch the last of the sunset or sit beside the little willow she transplanted yesterday and let the soft rustle of leaves soothe her mind. But Lillian would say no.

"I'm going to make another pot of tea," Lillian says. "Go to bed, Callie, I want to talk to your father."

The first ten minutes there's nothing except Lewis talking about the new homesteads being started all over the place. Lillian says how good it was to see Russell and bemoans the long winters and impassable roads.

"What's this idea of yours?" Lewis asks.

"Suppose we let Kjell and Dot put a house in the yard here, so they have access to water?"

"Hmm," Lewis says. The tobacco can lid rattles.

Callie doesn't know what to think either. Next door seems awfully close. Kjell's all right, but Dorothy might be like Lillian.

Lewis strikes a match. "If Kjell buys that half section on the west slope, they'll only be a mile away." The spicy aroma of Ogden Fine Cut drifts past the curtain.

"A mile might as well be twenty when the snow's deep. And you know what a chore it is hauling water."

"They'd be living right in our pockets," Lewis says.

"They'd have their own house. Dot would like it. We were close as children, and she'll be lonely out here after all those years teaching in Medicine Hat."

"It's a neighborly thing to do," Lewis says. "But what if something goes wrong? The boy might be trouble."

If the Rasmussens come to live next door, she'll likely have Dag following her around all summer, being a pain. A city boy. He won't know anything.

"He might be a help, too. Kjell seems reasonable and Dot and I always got along. If it doesn't work, we can ask them to leave."

Lewis's chair creaks and his footsteps stop at the airtight heater. The lid rattles, followed by the thud of new logs being added to the fire and the squeak of the damper closing.

"I know this farming life is tough on you," he says.

"It would be easier with a woman close by. Somebody I could talk to."

A long moment of silence. "I'll think about it."

Teacups rattle as Lillian puts them on the kitchen table. "Kjell might be willing to trade work. Then you wouldn't need Callie. She should be in the house with me, not driving tractors and harnessing horses."

"She's a good worker. Better than any hired man I ever had. And she likes working outside."

She wants to climb in his lap the way she did when she was little and nuzzle up against the homey tobacco-smelling denim and cold, hard metal buttons of his overalls, and hug him. *Better than any hired man*. Being called a good worker is absolutely the best compliment you can get.

Chapter Eight

Callie wakes to pans clattering and the smell of coffee in the kitchen and remembers, with a start that brings her upright in bed, that it's her twelfth birthday.

"Callie, get a move on!" Lillian calls.

She moves; there will be presents after breakfast.

The meal is bacon, eggs, and pan-fried potatoes. Lewis stares out the window, absent-minded, and takes an age to drink his coffee. Then he wants a second cup. Callie squirms with frustration.

Finally, Lewis finishes and heads out to the workshop. Lillian brings five gift-wrapped parcels from her bedroom and puts them in front of Callie.

"Here you are. Happy birthday!"

Callie starts with Rita's gift, ripping at the paper.

"Be careful how you open that, Callie. The wrapping paper can be used again." Lillian stands at the stove, stirring chicken stew.

Three crocheted, ruffled doilies in pale beige lie starched and layered between sheets of tissue paper. She can't think of anything she wants less.

"Those are lovely!" Lillian caresses them with her fingers. "Rita does beautiful work. I wish she'd make some for me." She glances toward a small picture hanging on the wall just inside the front room doorway.

Lillian sets great store by that picture. The others in the house are only jigsaw puzzles glued to cardboard backing and coated with clear shellac. The scenes are all right, but no matter how she squints at them, she can see where all the pieces join. This one of Lillian's, protected by a shallow glass bubble, is a bas-relief of an English country cottage with a steep thatched roof, surrounded by pink climbing roses, feathery shrubs, and a latticework fence. Lillian says the cottage is snug and homey, but it makes Callie feel like she can't breathe. It seems the perfect place for doilies.

"Do you want them? Because I don't."

"Callie! You can't give away a gift." Lillian shakes her head. "And you have no taste whatsoever. I despair of you, I really do." Lillian actually has tears in her eyes.

"They're mine. Why can't I give them away?"

"Because I say so. It isn't right."

Lillian has a lot of rules about how to live, but she never explains them. It doesn't make sense having a rule if there isn't a reason for it.

"You write a nice thank-you note to Rita, no matter what you think. She's been kind enough to do all that work for you, the least you can do is be grateful. I'll put these doilies away in the trunk; you'll appreciate them when you're grown and have some sense."

The next parcel is from Lillian and Lewis. She takes her time opening it, hoping it's the magnifying glass she asked for and not something as awful as doilies.

"For heaven's sake, don't be all day about it," Lillian says. "I need to use the table."

A blue velvet bow for her hair and four barrettes, two blue and two red. The barrettes are okay, but she'd rather die than wear a blue velvet bow in her hair.

"Thank you. They're very pretty."

"It's time we cut off that long mop of hair," Lillian says. "The barrettes will keep it out of your eyes until you get a perm. The bow is for Sunday wear, of course, with a

dress. I must get busy and make you an ordinary frock. Those trousers you wear are very unsuitable."

A blue dress, no doubt, to go with the velvet bow. And white ankle socks with oxfords. She'll feel as silly as she looks. If she has to give up jeans for Sundays, she'd rather wear a tweed skirt with box pleats, a white tailored blouse and green Foamtread loafers like the ones in Eaton's catalogue. She's not keen on getting her hair cut, either. Braids are easy.

Aunt Dorothy's present is a hand-knit navy cardigan. She stands up and struggles into it. The sleeves are three inches too short and the sweater too tight to button.

Lillian stops fussing with the stew. "Oh, that is too bad. I wonder if it would fit Rita. Or I could unravel it and knit a sleeveless vest. The trouble is you're much too big for twelve; people don't realize how fast you've grown."

Callie looks down at Lillian's five foot two. What good is it being four inches taller if she still gets ordered around like a six-year-old?

"A vest would be nice." Rita's present was a wash out and so was Lillian's. Callie sits down to open the others. It won't be fair if all her presents are a waste of time.

Etta's present is a book called *Flowering Earth*, by Donald Culross Peattie, and a little note that says, *"I'm sure you'll enjoy this, Callie. It's about how plants live, and how they developed from the beginning of time. Mr. Peattie is of Scots descent, the same as you, and he writes very well."* Callie opens the book. The first sentence is enthralling. *There is morning light here, shafting down through the live-oaks in smoky beams.*

"Callie, get your nose out of that book or I'll take it away. Finish your presents, then go do your chores."

Peter's is the last parcel and there are two things in it. One is a five-year diary with a red cover, a small brass lock and key, and crisp, smooth pages that beg for words to be written on them. She fingers the blank pages as if she holds the actual days in her hand and composes sentences in her head. Now she has a private place to write her thoughts instead of telling Jake and Martha. The other is a small notebook with unlined pages, perfect for making drawings and notes about the flowers she finds.

"Those things aren't very useful." Lillian folds giftwrap. "But your brother is not a practical person."

Callie hides the barrettes and blue bow on the top shelf of her closet and *Flowering Earth* under her pillow. She puts the diary and notebook in the center of her desk, the fountain pen beside them. She'll start writing the minute she gets back from feeding and watering chickens, gathering eggs, and bringing in wood and water.

Lillian walks in holding a white brassiere. "This came in the parcel yesterday. Try it on. If it doesn't fit, I'll have to send it back."

Callie crosses her fingers that it's the right size. She doesn't want to wait another two months to start wearing grown up clothes. Pulling the curtain across her doorway, she puts on the brassiere. The small cups fit over her breasts all right, but the straps feel tight.

Lillian comes in again. "Why did you shut the curtain? There's nobody in the house but me. How does it feel?"

"It's too tight."

Lillian walks around her, inspecting. "No, it's a good fit. I'll get a couple more next time I send an order to Eaton's. But you must wear bigger shirts. And I don't want you displaying yourself in that tight tee shirt Rita gave you at Christmas. It’s indecent."

Men display their bumps when they wear tight jeans. Why shouldn't she display hers? They're not very big. She puts her shirt back on and follows Lillian into the kitchen.

"What kind of birthday cake do you want?" The yellow mixing bowl and the eggbeater are waiting on the table.

"Chocolate, with lots of icing."

"Why don't you pick something else for a change? You always ask for chocolate."

There is nothing in the world as comforting as the taste and feel of chocolate icing in her mouth. Thick, dark chocolate melts on her tongue like the wood fire's sweet heat against her skin on cold winter nights.

After dinner Callie sits at the kitchen table, chin on her hands, while Lillian slathers icing on the devil's food layer cake. Five long hours until supper time.

Lillian puts the cake in the shed and pours hot water in the dishpan. "Quit dreaming and grab a tea towel. Women's work is never done, and you'd better get used to it."

Callie dries dishes, thinking about the diary. She's filled today's five lines talking about her birthday and last Sunday's about Kjell, Russell and Rita visiting, but she can't think of anything for the three days between. Nothing has happened that doesn't happen every day. The first four months of the diary are blank, too, but she can write something big there, maybe about the family.

The dishes done, she takes Lewis's medals from her shoe box of treasures and heads for the back door. Lillian stops her. "Where are you going with those medals?"

"I want Dad to tell me how he got them."

"Don't do that. It upsets him to be reminded of the war. I'll tell you what they mean."

Lillian takes the four medals from her and puts them on the kitchen table. "These two are service medals; everyone got them. This one with crossed swords and a crown is the Mons Star. Your father got that for fighting in the terrible battle at Mons." She picks up the last medal. "This is the important one. It's the Military Medal. They only gave that to men who were heroes."

The medal is not impressive, not as ornate as the others. "What did he do?"

"Wait, I'll get the citation and you can read it for yourself." Lillian comes back from the bedroom with a creased and yellowed paper.

For gallant conduct and devotion to duty. This N.C.O. was in charge of a night party on repairs and maintenance of plank road in the forward area from 26 October to 6 November 1917. This work has been continually shelled and bombed and on several occasions the party has had to be withdrawn. Cpl. McKenzie returned each time to the work and with great coolness and devotion to duty repaired all direct hits allowing the lorries of ammunition and material to reach their destination.

She tries to imagine the darkness of night shattered by noise and flashes of light, trucks roaring, shells bursting all around. Men dying. Her throat squeezes in a sob, the way it did over *Rilla of Ingleside* when Walter was killed at the front, though she'd cried more over Dog Monday waiting four years at the train station for Jem to come home. "It must have been really awful."

"He still has nightmares." Lillian gathers up the medals. "Put these away. And don't talk to him about it."

"Can I copy the citation into my diary?"

"I suppose so."

With each word, Callie imagines the horror. But the words, 'great coolness and devotion to duty' fill her with pride. Lewis must have had a 'steady hand' to be so brave.

Lillian puts away the citation. "Why don't you forget about your lessons today? We'll each write a poem and decide which one is best. When your father comes in, we can play scrabble or a couple of hands of whist before supper."

Callie can hardly believe her ears. It's been months since Lillian was willing to fool with words.

"Goody!" Her face grows hot; that's a little kid's word. "Any rules on how long the poem has to be?"

"No. But you have to finish by four o'clock."

At her desk, she chews the end of her pen and wonders what the poem should say. Lillian has a big advantage; she studied poetry and recitation when she was a girl and sometimes, she reads her little leather volume of Tennyson when her work is caught up. Callie's tried to read his poems but most of them don't make sense. Maybe because she doesn't know anything about the garden of civilization.

Should she write about sky dreams? No, it's too hard to describe the animal shapes clouds make and how they move. She'll write about the valley on a winter day.

At four, Lillian comes in. "Time's up."

"You go first."

"All right." Lillian hands her the poem.

The sun is shining on you and me,
And on the spuds in the ground.
Next fall we'll have the neighbors to tea
And give them cake all round.
The snow is falling on land and tree
And the spuds are all put away.
No neighbors come to visit me,
I eat cake alone every day.

Callie searches for something to say. "That's neat! And it rhymes, too."

"Poetry is supposed to rhyme," Lillian says. "Except it's not poetry, it's doggerel."

"What's doggerel?"

"Verses that rhyme but have no real meaning."

"I guess mine's doggerel, too." She giggles. "Or maybe it's catterel."

"I do wish you'd stop being silly." Lillian takes Callie's poem from the table and reads it aloud.

The sun swings up in a golden glow,
Diamonds shining in the snow,
Snowbirds singing in that tree,
Seems they sing for only me.
Sun swings over the housetop now,
Shadows short, and I see how
Icicles form in the clear, crisp cold
As they have done from times of old.
Sun swings down in the burning west,

I am well content in my small nest,
Safe from the north wind's chilling bite,
Feasting my eyes on that western light.

No more sun till tomorrow's dawn,
Soon the sunset too is gone.
Stars shine cold in the blue-black sky,
A lone wolf howls, his nose up high.
Hours to go before the first faint light.
But I, like the lone wolf, love the night.

"That's quite good," Lillian says. She drops the poem on Callie's table and heads for the door.

"So, which one is best?"

"It doesn't matter. We only did it for fun. Go bring some potatoes up from the cellar."

In the cellar Callie fills the basin. Could she have made the poem better? At least Lillian liked it and that must mean something because she criticizes everything, even her own cooking.

Lillian decides she's too busy to play whist but, when Lewis comes in, he challenges her to blackjack. Callie loses her three hundred pennies, as always, and puts them back in the old baking powder tin for next time.

Supper is toad-in-the-hole and canned green beans with mustard pickles. Afterward, Lillian brings the cake in from the shed, twelve pink candles stuck in the dark chocolate icing. It takes her three matches to light them and Callie only one breath to blow them all out.

"Did you make a wish?"

"Yep."

"Don't say 'yep.' It's not ladylike to use slang."

But Lillian says 'spuds.'

Callie eats two pieces of cake, saving the icing until last, and offers to wash the dishes instead of drying.

"No, I'll wash. You get in too much of a hurry to do it properly."

Maybe so, but she can write poetry.

Afterward, in her room, she folds a piece of writing paper in half and writes '*Happy Mother's Day, Love, Callie'* on the inside. The card looks bare, but she doesn't want to use the perfect dried flowers in her scrapbook. She shakes *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and riffles the pages, but no flowers fall out. Well, she can always dry more this summer. Slowly she tears out the wild rose page from the scrapbook and glues it on the front of the card. She slips it into the desk drawer to await Sunday morning and heads for the front room.

Lewis is asking Lillian, "What kind of a bee gives milk?"

"Bees don't give milk," Lillian says. "Oh, all right, I'll bite. What kind?"

"A boo bee."

Lillian laughs and so does Callie. Lillian's head jerks around. "What are you laughing

at?" A pause. "Well, I didn't realize you knew that much."

Her mother must think she's stupid. How could she not know that breasts give milk? Calves and kittens suckle, so do piglets, though it's a long time since they raised pigs.

She's curled up on the couch with Agatha Christie's *The Murder at the Vicarage* when she remembers a conversation she heard back in Poplar Ridge.

"That little bugger is bound and determined to suck," Lewis had said about a calf he was trying to wean. "He's even learned how to push his wire muzzle out of the way so he can get at the teats."

"Maybe you should go at it the other way round," Lillian said. "Cover the cow's udder with something."

"That's a good one, a brassiere for the cow!" Lewis was still laughing over it a week later.

Even if Lillian remembers that conversation, she doesn't think kids understand anything anyway.

Callie finishes the mystery and sighs with contentment. Too bad the story had to end; there were some funny bits as well as the murder mystery.

"Are you done with that book already?" Lillian puts her mending down. "You read too fast. I'm sure you don't understand half of what happened in the book."

It's impossible to slow down when she can't wait to find out who the murderer is.

Cocoa and cookies. The ten o'clock news, mostly about General MacArthur approving the Japanese constitution. As she goes into her room, Lewis puts a couple of logs on the fire and shuts the dampers. The house becomes silent.

It's a relief to get the bra off. She scratches her back where the band chafed and rubs her breasts. They feel better now they've been released from their cage. Getting used to wearing the bra is going to take time.

In bed with the diary and a flashlight, she writes, *"She doesn't want me to know anything except what she tells me. She acts like my life is this diary and she's the only one who can write in it."* Recording her true thoughts in a private place is a comfort, though. She locks the diary and pulls *Flowering Earth* from under her pillow.

The first two chapters are the most wonderful things she's ever read. She turns off the flashlight and sits clutching the book to her chest. Mr. Peattie says plants were the first creatures on earth and that humans depend on them totally for life. The amazing thing is that plants become iron and coal and limestone, too. And he says, "science sees into the heart of the oak."

There's no question now of what she will do. Become a botanist and see into the heart of the poplar, the wild rose, the bluebell. She will collect and study and write about every plant in the valley. And go on from there.

She hides the book under the bed and watches stars blinking in the dark sky, too excited to close her eyes. Being a botanist will be perfect. She'll work with plants all day long, every day, and write about them with beautiful words.

Chapter Nine

Saturday morning Lillian pokes her head in Callie's doorway and says, "Come on, shake a leg. Your father needs help putting the net across the creek."

Hell and damnation! By noon the net will be full of squirmy sucker fish heading up the creek to spawn. She'll have to spend all afternoon untangling the cold, slimy creatures so Lillian can prepare them for canning, instead of rereading *Flowering Earth*. "Can't we do it next week?"

"Next week will be too late. Tomorrow's Sucker Sunday and by the time everybody else is through catching fish there won't be any left for us. I want to get the cellar stocked for next winter."

Tomorrow is Mother's Day, too. Mother's Day and Sucker Sunday. Seems an odd combination. Lewis says there's a sucker born every minute but he's not talking about fish.

She walks across the road and down through the new grass, so green and spangled with dew that it glows in the early morning light. At the creek, she helps Lewis anchor the bottom of the net to the muddy creek bed with forked sticks. After he ties the top side to stakes on the bank, they watch the fish, none more than two or three pounds, surging against the heavy cord barrier.

"Can't we net them during the summer?" she asks.

"No. They're bottom feeders and the flesh goes soft when the water's warm. They don't taste good then."

As far as she's concerned, they don't taste good any time and they're full of nasty little bones, but food is food. "What if the game warden comes today?"

"He might come tomorrow, knowing it's Sucker Sunday, but I doubt it. He's a pretty decent fellow."

She wishes he'd come along before she has to untangle the fish. No, that's mean. If they get caught with a net in the creek Lewis would have to pay a fine.

After the noon meal, she and Lewis take a work bench and the wash tub down to the creek. They haul the net, alive with thrashing fish, onto a level stretch of grass.

Lillian follows, with a bucket and a sharp knife, and sets to work on the bench. "Callie, you're going to ruin those gloves." She fillets another fish and tosses the remains on the growing pile in the grass.

Callie grimaces as the fish in her grasp lunges free. "I can't stand touching them with my bare hands."

"Don't be silly, they won't hurt you."

That's what Lillian says every time Callie objects to something. She'll buy new work gloves out of her blackjack pennies if that's how it has to be; there's no way she's going to feel that living flesh pulse against her skin. She picks up her stick and clubs the fish on the head.

"You don't have to do that. They're only fish; they don't feel anything."

Why are they struggling and gasping in the net if they don't feel anything? Lillian probably doesn't think kids feel anything either.

She winces as she clubs the next fish. It lies still, a few strands of netting caught behind its gills.

Lillian says, "This makes me feel like a Billingsgate fishmonger. Fresh fish! Come and get them! Fresh fish! They'll still be wriggling when they hit your frying pan!" She starts humming a catchy little tune.

Callie clenches her jaws. Fish can't yell if they're hurt but Lillian would sure be screaming if somebody filleted and fried her.

When the fish are done, they carry everything up to the house where Lillian sterilizes jars and Callie cuts the fillets into chunks.

After Lewis finishes his tea, Lillian hands him a hammer. "I've been wanting a nail in the closet for months now." They disappear into the bedroom closet, their muffled voices conferring on where the nail is to go.

Lewis starts hammering. A crash, then the sound of breaking glass. Lillian rushes out of the bedroom.

"Oh! You've broken my picture!" She gazes down at the ruins of her rose-covered English country cottage. There's nothing left but crumbled plaster of Paris and shards of glass spread across the floor. "The Poplar Ridge Women's Institute gave me that picture as a going-away present."

"Sorry," Lewis mutters, "forgot it was there."

Two tears slide down Lillian's cheeks. "It's a rotten shame! That's the only pretty thing I've got."

Callie's throat tightens. Her mother always loved that picture; it must have reminded her of England.

"Well, no use crying over spilt milk." Lillian goes out to the shed.

"Can't it be mended?" Callie asks.

Lewis shakes his head. She can tell he feels bad, but he didn't mean to break the picture. Her mother should have remembered it was on that wall.

Lillian comes back with broom and dustpan and, tight-lipped, attacks the debris as if she were punishing it.

She hardly says a word all evening and listens to Jack Benny on the radio without once cracking a smile. It's sad that her picture is broken. But maybe it's the Furies getting even with her for not caring how fish feel.

After Callie's been in bed for half an hour, she hears Lillian say, "Have you thought any more about letting Kjell and Dot put their house here in the yard?"

The lid of the tobacco tin rattles onto the table. Funny how Lewis has a smoke every time Lillian asks him a question he doesn't like.

"Can't say I'm much in favor of it."

"I think that's selfish." There are tears in Lillian's voice. "It would make all the difference in the world to me having Dot right next door."

After a moment, Lewis says, "What if they go broke?"

"Dorothy says they've got money. Kjell inherited quite a lot from his grandparents."

"I don't like people living so close."

"And we know why that is, don't we?" There's anger in Lillian's voice now.

Lewis says, "You don't know anything about it. You weren't there." His tone is mild but there's an edge to it.

Callie holds her breath; the silence feels thin and fragile, like glass.

Finally, Lillian says, "Kjell would be a big help to you. And Dag could take over Callie's outside chores."

Lewis's feet thud to the floor. "All right, I'll talk to Kjell when he comes back."

"You won't regret it."

Lewis grunts and Callie hears the floor creak as he heads for the shed. The back door opens and closes. It's a long time before he comes back.

Most times when he says he'll think about something it means he's going to say no. But he didn't this time.

"That's a very nice card, Callie. Thank you." Lillian puts the Mother's Day card on the radio. "I do love roses." She looks out at the thin patches of grass between the house and the dirt road and sighs. "I'd like some proper roses, but I don't suppose they'd ever last through the winter."

What Lillian plants with her own hands she calls flowers. Everything else is a weed and she says 'weed' like a swear word. Last summer Callie had brought her a bouquet of wildflowers for her birthday, fireweed, bluebells, and dandelions with little sunshine faces. All the thanks she got was 'Why are you bringing those weeds into the house?'

Lillian should have more respect for plants; they've been here a lot longer than humans. Mr. Peattie says plants and humans are made of the same stuff, too. The only reason they don't look alike is because they've been evolving in a different direction for millions of years.

A gun shot echoes across the valley.

"They're at it already," Lillian says. "It's a sin to waste shells on fish."

If the bullet strikes the brain, at least the fish dies at once instead of thrashing in the net, drowning in air. But if not, the fish bleeds and flops for long horrible minutes in the water. She presses her nose against the front room window. People are moving along the creek, some on horseback, and they'll soon be on Herron's Nest. Nobody pays attention to boundaries on Sucker Sunday.

"Is Dad going to bury the fish guts we left on the creek bank?" She hopes they've started to stink already so people will stay away from that part of the creek.

"He decided to leave them for the foxes."

That's all right. There's a den of red foxes across the creek, down about a quarter of a mile. If she sits on the bank at dusk, still and silent, sometimes she sees the mother bring the cubs out to play.

"Go down to the creek and see who's there," Lillian says. "You shouldn't be inside on such a lovely day. If the Baileys are fishing, ask them for a bite at noon."

She doesn't want to go. Dozens of strangers will be there, and she won't know what to say to them. Anyway, it's infuriating to see people stomping around on her land, scooping fish out of her creek. Some families will sit on the creek bank, just as if they own it, and have a picnic lunch. She sends a mental message to the foxes, 'Stay out of sight; somebody might think you're good to eat, too.'

The back door bangs and Lewis walks into the front room. "Is the coffee on yet?"

"It'll be ready in two shakes." Lillian hurries into the kitchen.

"Dad, is it legal for those people to be on our land?"

"No, but it wouldn't be neighborly to refuse them." He takes his pipe out of the brass ashtray and fills it.

"Why neighborly? We don't trespass on their land."

A sharp smell of sulphur rises from the struck match, followed by the sweet smoke of pipe tobacco. "Some day we might need help. That's what neighbors do for each other."

But they manage everything quite well on their own. The smoke rising from Lewis's pipe makes her think of fire. If the house caught fire, they'd be in trouble, though. Someone would have to take them in until it was rebuilt.

Lillian brings the coffee. Lewis says, "How about you and Callie helping me plant the spuds today?"

"But this is Sunday! You shouldn't work today."

"The ground is ready and the weather's good. The season's short enough without wasting Sundays."

"But what will all those people down at the creek think if they see us out there working?"

"You don't have to come. Callie and I can do it."

"You're corrupting that child."

She wants to be corrupted. It will save her going down to the creek and watching people trample around her favorite willow clumps, disturbing the growth of the new grass.

"Don't know what you're making a fuss over," Lewis says. "You cook all day Sunday."

"That's different. People have to eat." Lillian glances at the empty space on the wall where her English cottage picture had hung. "It would be nice to go to church some Sunday. It's been a long time since I put on a good dress and a proper hat and a pair of gloves. We could have tea afterward with the Harrises."

Callie remembers the sepia photograph of Lillian in white, prayer book in hand. Did Lillian spend her girlhood wearing dresses and hats and going to tea? And live in a house with fancy furniture, dishes, and doilies? The way she goes on about manners and the 'ignorance of the lower classes,' she must come from a high-class family.

"We'll see how the work goes this summer," Lewis says. "Guess there's no reason we can't leave the place for a few hours now and again."

He goes to the barn to harness Dolly and Dinah so he can plow half the garden into furrows for the potatoes. Lillian helps Callie bring seed potatoes from the cellar and sets her up on a bench behind the house with several buckets and a sharp paring knife.

"Mind you don't waste those. Each piece of potato should have just one eye in it unless the eyes are so close together you can't cut between them."

Soon she'll be helping Lillian plant onions, beans, and beets, listening to more instructions she's only heard a thousand times before. But the sun is hot on her back and sparrows trill in the willows. The potatoes give off an aroma of sweetness and must combined, not at all like the green foliage that will grow from these dull creamy chunks.

By noon she's lugged the potatoes to the garden and Lewis has finished the furrows. She follows him to the barn, where she sucks in the vigorous smells of leather, horse sweat and manure, and helps unharness the mares and turn them out to pasture. The rest of the job must be done by hand, dropping seed potatoes eighteen inches apart in the furrows, the eyes facing down. Lewis will rake soil over them, building long narrow mounds. It's not easy work, but at least she doesn't have to go down to the creek.

Lillian pushes a pot of stew to the cool side of the stove and scowls at Callie's hands.

"You should have worn gloves for that job. You'll never get your hands clean."

The dirt will come out of the ridges in her fingers like it always does. Might take a day or two, but so what?

There's the sound of a motor and Lillian's hands fly to her mouth. "Visitors! Callie, wash up; you'll have to set the table. And go down cellar and bring up a jar of rhubarb jelly." She rushes into the bedroom to comb her hair and put on face powder.

Callie fetches the jelly and holds it up to the light of the kitchen window. The clear orange-red looks nothing like rhubarb. Rhubarb skin is dark red and bright green, and the flesh is creamy white, colors as sharp as the raw fruit's sour explosion on the tongue.

Lillian hurries out of the bedroom, trailing the scent of lilac cologne. "For heaven's sake, get a move on!"

Callie wrinkles her nose as she lays out cutlery. The cologne is soppy sweet and not like lilac at all. If she had to smell of anything, she'd prefer fresh baked bread.

The visitors are the Baileys from north of Millburn. Mr. Bailey is tall and gaunt like Lewis, his face burned and creased like old leather. Mrs. Bailey is tiny and looks as if she'd have trouble lifting a pound of butter, but Mr. Bailey says she can lick her weight in wildcats.

The first time Callie had heard Lillian and Mrs. Bailey talk about England and complain of the raw wildness of western Canada, she wondered why they came to Canada but that was soon explained.

"You have to go where your husband goes," Lillian had said, "and mine wanted to live in this godforsaken place."

"Mr. Bailey had romantic notions about pioneering," Mrs. Bailey said, "and the Peace River country is the last frontier for farming."

"Does he still think it's romantic?" Lillian asked.

"Oh dear, yes. He'd have been quite happy living in a sod shack the way people did on the prairies fifty years ago if I hadn't put my foot down. Men!"

There was a lot to be said for being a man, Callie had thought. They had adventures and went where they liked.

Now she sets the table for five while Lillian rushes around the kitchen, her face flushed.

"Did you get some fish, Mrs. Bailey?" Lillian asks.

"Enough for perhaps four dozen pint sealers, my dear. This is rough country, but food is plentiful if you have the means to gather it." Mrs. Bailey shakes her head. "Water is the problem. You're lucky to have that spring."

"Don't I know it!" Lillian checks the boiling potatoes with a fork. "I'll never forget those six days we spent on the trail in 1929, coming up here. Every night we stopped at hostels and there was never water to wash with. We had to sleep in our clothes, too."

"It was dreadful; some of those places were just caves dug into the hillside, with a bit of straw piled onto wooden bunks and thick with bedbugs."

Lillian drains the water from the potato pot into the slop bucket. "The log buildings weren't much better. It's shocking what men will put up with."

"Those were frontier men, my dear. Freighters and hunters, not gentlemen."

Mrs. Bailey has a garden of civilization voice, too.

"Things are better now." Mrs. Bailey fingers the linen napkin Lillian took from the tin trunk for her. "But it will take years to tame this country and make it beautiful."

The wilderness is beautiful the way it is!

"It's a hard life, but it's what Lewis likes." Lillian piles mashed potatoes into a serving dish. "Callie, go call the men in. Dinner's ready."

After the meal is done and Mrs. Bailey and Lillian are reminiscing over cups of tea about living in tents during their first summer while the men built houses and barns and cleared land, Lillian says, "Would you like to stay for supper? I'd be delighted to have you."

"I'm afraid we can't, my dear. Mr. Bailey and I intend to finish planting our vegetable garden this afternoon."

Callie waits for Lillian to say something about not working on Sunday, but what comes out of her smiling mouth is, "That's what we're doing, too. Such lovely weather for gardening."

A sentence from the Western she'd read last week pops into Callie's head.

'White woman speak with forked tongue.'

Chapter Ten

On Tuesday Callie packs her church-going clothes, vests and panties, an extra pair of slacks and all four of her shirts in Lewis's battered brown and tan striped suitcase. She adds her diary, a Dorothy Sayers novel, and *Flowering Earth*. Mr. Peattie and Lord Peter Wimsey will help her put up with Cathleen's nosiness and the two brats pestering and yelling all the time.

Lillian stands in the bedroom doorway, one hand resting on the door jamb. "You don't know how lucky you are. I'd give anything to be in your place. It's years since I've had a chance to attend church."

She wants to say, 'Go ahead. I'd rather stay here,' but Lillian would only give her more grief.

"Are you wearing your brassiere?" Lillian eyes her chest suspiciously.

Oh, hell, she should have made sure she was wearing a loose shirt. "No. It's uncomfortable."

"Well, put it on right now and keep it on. All women wear them. You'll get used to it. And hurry up, your father's waiting for you."

The bra is beginning to feel more like a punishment than a privilege. She closes her suitcase and goes outside. Lewis throws the case in the back of the Fargo, beside a half dozen empty gas barrels.

"Behave yourself." Lillian stands at the back door, arms folded across her chest. "Obey Mrs. Harris and pay attention to your lessons. I don't want to hear any more about your heathen notions when you get home, either."

After the fuss Lillian has made, she's not about to say another word on the subject. Nor will she wear that bra in town. She'll work on getting used to it later.

She looks across the valley and imagines never coming back. Never again sitting on the sun-warmed rock ledge above the spring and smelling sweet morning air rising from the valley, or listening to the coyotes' eerie songs on moon-frosted winter nights. Swallowing, she shakes her head to dispel the fantasy. She'll be away only two weeks, maybe less. And it might be an adventure.

Her freshly washed canvas running shoes squeak on the metal floor of the truck cab. There's a powerful odor of oil and gasoline and the green leather upholstery oozes stuffing from a dozen cracks. She's thought about trying to mend it, but the leather is stiff and brittle.

She waves to Lillian and Jake as the truck bumps and wheezes down the road. She envies Rosie, Buck, and the horses, grazing on tender new grass up in the pasture, their coats shining under the serene May sunlight. They don't even bother to look up as she goes by.

"Dad, which road are we going to take?"

"The highway."

The Alaska Highway is the shortest route to Fort St. John and south to Dawson Creek if you don't mind clouds of dust and flying gravel. It's wide but has more washboard than the narrow dirt roads. In other places the gravel is too thick, making the truck slew around the same as it does on ice.

The trail leading to the highway has muddy potholes and roots sticking up in the

middle. Poplar, birch, and spruce branches entwine overhead. Spending the next two weeks exploring the spring enchantment of the forest would be a lot more fun than going to town.

A few minutes after they turn onto the highway, they meet a big semi heading north.

"He's really pouring the coals to it," Lewis says.

A rock flies through Lewis's open window, crashes into the door panel on her side and falls to the floor.

"Jesus Christ!"

Lewis pulls over onto the shoulder and she hands him the rock, a good two inches in diameter. He takes a blue handkerchief from the back pocket of his overalls and mops his forehead. "A split second later and I'd be dead!"

His flesh falls away, nothing but his skeleton sitting behind the wheel, his felt hat perched on a polished skull. No, not Lewis, not yet. Not for a very long time yet.

"I'm going to the goddam Highways Department. Why can't they use goddam gravel instead of goddam rocks?" He starts the truck and rolls back onto the Highway. His jaws are taut, making the hollows in his cheeks deeper.

Lewis's anger is worse than Lillian's, maybe because it hardly ever happens. She's scared to say anything. When he starts yelling it feels like he's yelling at her. Anyway, what is there to say?

Muscles and insides knotted, she huddles in the corner of the cab. Now and then she sneaks a look at him. He's clean-shaven today — Lillian insists on it when he's going to town — and the set of his jaw is grim. If he'd talked to Lillian about confirmation classes the way he did about the Highways Department, she wouldn't have to go through with it. What if she had talked to Lillian that way?

Even the thought makes her shiver.

"Do you want me to come to the airport to get the baby chicks?" Every year they order a hundred Rhode Island Reds, which all too soon grow from cheeping balls of yellow fluff to squawking, dim-witted egg machines. But they're fun when they're little.

He turns off the Highway and the truck rattles along the town's main street. "No, I can handle the chicks. You may as well get this over with."

She sighs. Cathleen Harris is always telling her how to act and think and talk. That's what godmothers are supposed to do, according to Lillian. Just like mothers.

"Her bark's worse than her bite, Callie."

Maybe he doesn't like Cathleen either. The prospect of listening to her godmother suddenly seems bearable. "Are you coming back for me in two weeks?"

"Sooner if the ground dries out."

She doesn't want to miss one minute of seeding. The harvest from that seed will feed all the two- and four-legged animals of Herron's Nest for another year. Mr. Peattie says plant life feeds every creature on earth in one way or another.

"I'll drop you off at the post office," Lewis says. Bert Harris has a farm north of town, but his main job is postmaster. Cathleen teaches elementary school, where she practices telling people what to do.

At the post office Callie gets out of the truck, sighing again. Still, Bert is nice, and she'll have a couple of hours helping him sort mail before she has to face Cathleen and the monsters.

"Be good," Lewis says, "and if you can't be good, be careful."

She doesn't have much choice, does she?

Cathleen, a tall solid woman, says, "Now pay attention to Father Penrose, Callie. He's doing you a special favor by having classes after school instead of just on Sundays."

She doesn't want any special favors. If he's like Lillian, he'll think she should be grateful and do anything he wants. Cathleen says he's nice and a good priest, but that means nothing. She often says Lillian is wonderful.

Callie walks along the gravel road to town, Cathleen's prayer book in her hand, the afternoon sun hot on her face. The scents of damp earth and young, green leaves tease her nostrils. Cathleen says Lillian's 1892 prayer book is outdated and the church now uses one issued in 1928. This seems strange. If the Bible is the 'truth' then the prayer book must be, too. How can either be changed? If God really exists, then what He said should stand for all time.

The rectory is next door to St. Martin's, on the north edge of town. She's seen the church before, driving by with Lewis, and it's like a dollhouse, white and narrow, with six feet of porch, three feet of spire and no stained glass, not at all like the big, imposing churches she's seen in books. The rectory looks just like an ordinary house, the caragana hedge in front sprouting fresh growth. She walks up the concrete sidewalk, her stomach fluttering.

Father Penrose is a surprise. He's about the same age as Peter and Russell, with black hair and black eyes. His smile is wide, making the corners of his eyes crinkle.

"Come in, Callie." He holds the door open for her. "Your godmother's told me such a lot about you."

She blinks. What is there to tell?

"I understand you've been studying the catechism."

"Yes." In fact, she's memorized most of it already.

"Good. Come along and meet your fellow students."

Father Penrose isn't wearing black robes, the way she thought priests always did, just the backwards white collar and a black vest thing under his tweed jacket.

Three girls are sitting on the couch. Father Penrose introduces them as Lorna, Agnes, and Joy, and they say hello in small, prim voices. They're wearing dresses with cap sleeves and gathered skirts and Baby Doll wedgies with ankle straps. She feels ridiculous in black oxfords, but the pink and white candy stripe dress fits in all right.

"Sit over there in the armchair, Callie, and we'll begin our lesson."

She crosses in front of the couch, the oxfords clumping and squeaking like they're carrying an elephant. She keeps her shoulders straight and her head up, barely breathing, as three pairs of eyes follow her. Halfway, she trips over a scatter rug. There's a smothered snort of laughter from the couch. She sits, face burning, and stares at the priest.

He pulls up a straight chair. "Before we begin the lesson, I'd like to ask Callie if she has any questions about the first part of the catechism."

She hesitates. Will the other girls think she's stupid? "The first question is 'What is your name?' and the answer says 'N or M.' I don't know what that means."

"It simply means that you must state your given names. Yours is Cathleen, I believe."

He smiles kindly and one of the girls giggles. It's Lorna, the one with short dark hair and a lot of teeth.

"I know that." Is she supposed to call him Father, or what? "It's the letters I don't understand. If 'M' means male, why isn't there an 'F' for female instead of the 'N'?"

"The Book of Common Prayer is very old," Father Penrose says, "and the language is rather archaic. All you need remember is to answer with your given name."

Doesn't he *know* what the 'N' and 'M' stand for? Aren't priests supposed to know everything about the Bible? She might as well give up; he obviously isn't going to explain.

He eyes her for a few seconds. "Any problems with the second question?"

"No."

"The third?"

"No."

He leans back in his chair, looking more relaxed. "How about the fourth?"

"I understand it." She takes a deep breath. "But I don't agree with it."

Father Penrose raises his black eyebrows. With the black clothes he's wearing, all he needs are horns and a tail and he'd look like the devil she's supposed to be renouncing.

"I see we have a debater in our midst." His smile is indulgent and the girls on the couch titter. "All right, what don't you agree with?"

"The question asks if I'm bound to believe and do as my godparents promised for me. And I don't think I am. How can anybody make promises for a little baby?"

"Your godparents made those promises for your own good, for your happiness. Of course, you're bound to keep them."

She can tell he likes this question. He's leaning forward, looking even more benevolent.

"What if my godparents promised I'd be an explorer? I wouldn't have to keep that promise, would I?"

"Don't you want to be saved and live in God's grace?"

What is she being saved from?

"I just don't think it's fair for other people to make promises that I have to keep."

Father Penrose paces twice around the room and stops in front of her. "Not if they're foolish promises. But this is a very solemn promise made in order to save your soul and ensure your entrance into heaven. If you're serious about entering into the church of our Lord, you must agree that you are bound to believe and do as they promised for you."

She's not going to get anywhere with this either. "Yes, all right."

"Fine." He sits down again. "We've been discussing the ten Commandments. We'll get on with that now."

"Father," says Joy, the girl with a single red braid down her back, "it's getting awfully hot in here."

He looks at the airtight heater as though astonished to see it there. "You're right, Joy. I must have forgotten to close the damper." He hurries to the heater, reaches up and grabs the damper handle.

"Damn!" He shakes his fingers and blows on them.

Priests aren't supposed to swear! To her surprise, the other girls look at each other and giggle. If they believe in God, shouldn't they be shocked?

Father Penrose doesn't seem embarrassed, though. He comes back to his chair and

says, "All right, girls. Let's test your memories. Recite the Articles of Belief."

Lorna, Joy, and Agnes whip through the words so fast she only catches up halfway through. When they're finished, the priest says, "Now, do you all understand what the first Commandment means?"

Agnes, the chubbiest of the three, holds up her hand. "It means we shouldn't worship any other gods."

In *Mythology*, Zeus is fierce, a lot like the Christian God, but Artemis and Athena are nice. Do the Greeks still believe in them or in the Christian God?

"And what does the Commandment mean by 'other gods'?"

She waits, expecting the other three to answer, but they say nothing. "Like the Greek gods?" she says.

"That's correct. But those are not the only gods we must renounce." Father Penrose leans forward again, his hands resting on his knees. "Some people worship money and that is wrong, too."

It's nice to have, though. If she had money, she'd buy a microscope, a tweed skirt, and a bridle for Silver.

The priest works through the next two Commandments and begins on the fourth, which says you're not allowed to work on Sunday. Having a day off is good but farmers often have to work on Sundays, seeding or harvesting. Sometimes they have to doctor animals or fix machinery. Father Penrose talks like he doesn't know anything about the real world.

When he gets to the seventh Commandment, she asks, "What does 'adultery' mean, Father?"

He says quickly, "It means a wife being unfaithful to her husband. Or a husband being unfaithful to his wife."

Does that mean one of them does something the other won't like? But Joy and Lorna are smirking at each other. "Could you give me an example?"

"We don't have time for any more questions today, girls," he says, "I'll see you on Friday."

They're supposed to meet three days a week, Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, which means she has only four more sessions before Lewis comes to get her. If hot weather comes, she can go home sooner.

"Callie, stay for a moment, will you?"

She shifts from one foot to the other while the three girls walk away. She wanted to talk to them, ask if they really believe in God and what they think about the church and Father Penrose.

"When you come to church on Sunday, Callie, I'd like you to come to confession afterward. Would you do that?"

"I don't know how; I've never been to confession."

"It's very simple," he says. "You confess all your sins and ask God's forgiveness. I should think it would be something you'd want to do."

"But I haven't committed any sins."

Father Penrose smiles at her the way people smile at babies and puts his hand on her shoulder. "Callie, you were born in sin and even though baptism cleansed your soul, you've sinned every day of your life since."

She edges away from his hand. "But how?"

"Pride, envy, anger, telling lies perhaps."

So what if she's fibbed to Lillian or been angry at her? If she can't help getting angry, then it's not a sin.

"I'll have to ask my mother."

He nods. "You do that, Callie. I'm sure she's a good Christian woman and will agree."

She walks along the road, kicking pebbles. A person can't be born in sin. Babies aren't responsible for what they do or think. They're not even responsible for being born. It isn't fair to blame them for something they can't help. She throws a rock at a fence post. It strikes with a satisfying thunk.

Religion seems to be about sin and believing you're a terrible person. There's nothing in it about plants or animals. Nothing about how important the land and sun and rain are or how they all fit together. It's like God is a thousand Lillians rolled into one and nobody is allowed to figure anything out for themselves.

Callie wakes at sunrise on Sunday morning and stares at the strange cracks in the ceiling. It takes her a moment to remember she's in the Harris's attic. At home, Lewis will be bringing Rosie and Buck in from the pasture and feeding the chickens. She stretches, yawns, and cuddles under the blankets. The cool air wafting in from the open window has a delicate tang of wood smoke.

Birds are gossiping in the trees outside. Now and then, one flies across the cloudless square of blue sky opposite her bed, but a single glimpse isn't enough to identify them. Except for crows. There's no mistaking the crows' shiny black feathers or their harsh talk. What are they saying when they gather in one tree, all cawing at once?

There must be books about birds, with pictures, the same as there are about flowers. A book wouldn't help with the sounds, though. She wishes she could understand bird talk. Those that fly south in winter or north in summer could tell her stories about deserts and tundra and oceans. About ships sailing around the world.

"Callie, get up!" Cathleen shouts from downstairs.

Her eyes blink open. The alarm clock on the dresser says nine. Darn! She'd wanted to lie in bed and think about things, not fall asleep again. Or write in the diary, but she has so many thoughts about Father Penrose and religion they'd fill up half the book.

After breakfast, Cathleen follows her up the stairs, the heels of her pumps loud on the creaking steps.

"Is this all you've got to wear to church?" Cathleen holds the candy stripe dress at arm's length.

"Yes."

"It'll have to do then. What about a hat?"

"I've got a tam, but it's too hot to wear that." It's Lillian's green one and would look terrible with pink.

"Put it on. Women must wear hats in church."

Cathleen has on a green crepe dress with an ivory rose brooch at the throat, a green pillbox hat with a little veil and high-heeled pumps. Even in her stocking feet she towers over Callie, but with heels on, she's downright scary.

A clatter of leather soles on the staircase and David, the ten-year-old, appears. He's

wearing a proper suit and his hair is slicked down.

"Ma! Callie's folks are here."

Lewis has come for her! Callie flies down the stairs and through the kitchen, where Bert has one foot up on a kitchen chair, polishing his shoe, and out the back door.

Lillian's wearing her best dress, pale blue with pink flowers all over it and a little straw hat with more flowers. Powder, lipstick, white gloves, even earrings.

Callie slows to a walk. Lillian's dressed for church, so they won't be heading back to the farm until that's over.

Lewis, in his usual overalls, plaid shirt and scuffed work boots, stands with one hand on the truck fender, waiting for Lillian to smooth her feathers.

"Well, kid, you learning anything?" he asks.

Lillian brushes dust off her purse. "You'd better be, or I'll know the reason why."

Bert and Cathleen come out and the two boys eddy round the adults while everyone talks at once. Callie stands to one side. It sounds like crows having a meeting.

Lewis and Bert wander off, Bert pointing at the field behind the house, perhaps telling Lewis what he plans to seed there. David and Jerry start to follow the men, but Cathleen reels them in on the steel line of her voice.

"Get back here this instant! It took two hours to get you cleaned up for church and you're going to stay clean."

Lillian gives Callie a little push toward the house. "You go get changed. We don't want to be late."

It takes only a minute to put on the dress and green tam. She's at the door before she remembers to go back and put on the brassiere. In the kitchen, she waits for a break in the conversation.

"Father Penrose wants me to go to confession."

Lillian's eyes widen. "Confession! Certainly not. I won't have you participating in that Catholic nonsense."

"He's very high church," Cathleen says. "Preaches wonderful sermons, though."

"Well, we're low church and going to stay that way." Lillian takes her gloves off and smooths them out on the table. "If he asks you again, tell him I forbid it. I don't hold with confession."

Callie is tempted to go just to see why it upsets Lillian so much. But if she has to choose between Father Penrose being disappointed and Lillian being mad, there's only one sensible answer.

"What's wrong with Catholics?" she asks.

"They're not properly religious. They worship the Pope, not God."

That sounds really odd. This low church, high church business is odd, too. Father Penrose and Lillian both say they believe in God, so what's the difference? The Greeks are different because they worship Zeus. Incas worshiped the sun, which makes much more sense.

Lillian goes to the front room and gazes at the piano.

"Why don't you play something?" Cathleen follows her. "I love listening to you."

Bert pokes his head in the back door. "You ladies ready yet?"

"Perhaps I will later," Lillian says, pulling on her gloves. "We mustn't be late for church."

They cram into Bert's black '39 Plymouth, except for Lewis, who says, "Church is

wasted on me. I'll get more out of staying here and reading the newspaper."

Callie is stuck in the back seat between David and Jerry, who argue loudly and keep reaching across her to hit each other. She hopes she isn't going to be car sick.

"I wish Lewis had come," Lillian says. "It's not right to miss church when he has the chance to go."

Callie wouldn't mind missing church at all but with her mother and godmother both hot on getting her a religious education, there's no point even thinking about it. Once she's grown up, she's not going to do one single thing she doesn't want to do.

It's a relief when the car stops, and she can escape the hot, sweaty wriggling of the two boys. In the church, they all slide into a pew halfway down the aisle. Lillian says, "It's too bad they don't use the English system here. When I was a girl, we had our own private family pew."

Sunlight splashes across the dark stained wood and scuffed floorboards, the air thick with perfume, powder, and floor oil. The pump organ creaks and wheezes over the rustles and whispers of the congregation.

She counts heads and calculates the church will hold forty people. Looking for Lorna, Agnes, and Joy, she sees a black man in the front row and forgets about her classmates. She's never seen a Negro except in magazine pictures.

Lillian says in a low voice, "What's that nigger doing here? They should have their own church."

"He's the only one in town," Cathleen says. "He couldn't support a church all by himself."

"Well, it isn't right. He shouldn't be allowed to use our church. They aren't quite human, you know."

"Leave the poor bugger alone," Bert growls. "He's not doing you any harm."

The man looks just like anyone else except for his rich brown skin and short crinkly black hair. She'd like to touch his face and see if it feels like hers. His suit and tie make him look as respectable as the people with white skin. Red skin, she amends, glancing sideways at Lillian's angry face. Church is supposed to be about brotherly love, but Lillian doesn't seem to know that.

Father Penrose, in his black robes, walks to the altar and the organ gasps out the first hymn. The response is ragged; only the Negro's voice is true to the music, a deep baritone leading the others verse by verse. And Lillian's soprano, rising pure and true beside her. Callie would like to sing, too, but her voice can't decide if it's alto or soprano and keeps slipping from one to the other. Besides, the hymn book has no notes, only words, so she can't tell whether the music is going to go up, down or sideways.

When Father Penrose starts the reading, it seems to be about planting grain, and she leans forward.

"Some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it had not much soil, and immediately it sprang up, since it had no depth of soil; and when the sun rose it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. And other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold."

Jesus must have known all about planting grain, even if Father Penrose doesn't. After a moment she realizes, with a pang of disappointment, that he's talking about 'the seed of

faith,' not grain.

Her gaze drifts across the aisle. Lorna is two rows ahead, Joy beside her. Callie stares, willing them to turn around. A few seconds later, Lorna does turn her head and Callie gives her a little wave. Lorna pokes Joy and they both flutter their fingers at her.

Lillian grabs her hand and hisses, "Pay attention!"

Father Penrose quotes Jesus again. "Truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

That must be another parable because it isn't right in nature. A seed passes life on to the new plant and becomes a part of it, so it doesn't really die.

Couldn't he give the sermon in plain language? She lets her gaze linger on the Negro with his beautiful skin, then wander from window to window, to the poplars and blue sky outside. It's hard to fathom why all these people want to sit in this stuffy little building on a sunny morning.

At the end the congregation spills out the double doors to stand on the steps and block the sidewalk. Talk, talk, talk! Too many people, too much chatter; it's hard to think. She pulls the tam off and heads for the Plymouth.

When she reaches the gate, the black man is right in front of her. He turns, smiles, and gives her a wink. She smiles back and opens her mouth to say something so he'll talk to her. But he turns and strides away.

In the car, Lillian says from the front seat, "You should have stayed and said hello to Father Penrose."

"Did you tell him I can't go to confession?"

"No, it's up to you to tell him. Perhaps he won't ask about it again. But if he does, just say I forbid it."

Cathleen puts out ham and potato salad for dinner and everyone crowds around the table. The talk is punctuated by Cathleen or Bert snapping at the boys, who reach across the table, talk with their mouths full and throw food.

When Lewis goes outside to smoke his pipe, Callie follows. "Are we going home now?"

"Your mother wants to visit old Mrs. Clarke in the hospital." He rests a hand on her shoulder, and she leans into the comfort of his unexpected touch. "I'll come for you next week. It's not dry enough yet to start seeding." He takes his hand away and she's on her own again.

It turns out only the grownups are going to visit Mrs. Clarke. Cathleen says to David and Jerry, "You mind what Callie says and be good boys. Don't play in the front room. No snacks, either. We'll only be gone an hour or so."

Hell! Why does she have to look after the brats? If Bert and Cathleen can't make them behave, how can she?

When the Plymouth has gone, noise in the front room leads her to the open door. "Hey! You're not supposed to go in there."

David sticks out his tongue and runs behind Bert's big easy chair. "Bet you can't catch me." Jerry is on the other side of the room, opening the piano lid.

When she yanks him off the bench, he wriggles away and runs to the china cabinet.

He taps his finger on every piece he can reach. "See, I'm touching!" David snickers.

They're so awful. And she can't chase both at once.

David joins Jerry at the china cabinet. She moves fast, grabbing their collars and hustling them out of the room. When she lets go, they race for the stairs, David shouting, "We're going to tear your bed apart."

Oh, God, what if they find her diary?

Two minutes later they come pounding down to the kitchen. David takes bread from the bread box and says, "Want a peanut butter sandwich, Jerry?"

"Leave that alone," she says. "Or I'll tell your mother when she comes home."

"You're a snitch," David says. "You can't tell us what to do. You're just a big kid."

Something inside flares like a struck wooden match. She rushes toward them. "I'll give you a thick ear!"

They run outside and she leans on the table, winded, hands shaking. After a moment she puts the bread away and looks out the back window. The boys are playing with their toy trucks beside the garage. She locks the door.

Upstairs her bed is still made, and it doesn't look like they touched anything. They're little monsters, all right, but she shouldn't have lost her temper.

Callie takes her Dorothy Sayers book and sits at the kitchen table where she can see the driveway. She is not going to unlock that door until she sees the car coming.

"I'll give you a thick ear!"

That's one of the things Lillian says. Her face feels hot, and tears prickle her eyes. She doesn't want to talk like Lillian. Not ever.

On Saturday Callie strolls along the road toward St. Martin's rectory. Tomorrow she's going home. She can hardly wait to see if the little willow has grown. She'll see Jake, too. He must have missed her.

Lillian won't have missed her. On Sunday, when the adults came back from the hospital, she'd told Cathleen how the boys misbehaved. Bert took them out to the wood pile and gave them both a licking with a piece of kindling.

Lillian had said, "You're too hard on them, Callie. They're just little boys."

She couldn't believe her ears. If she'd acted as bad as the boys, Lillian would have yelled at her for weeks. Her mother must like boys better than girls. She certainly thinks Russell is the most wonderful creature in the world.

Father Penrose lets her in and waves her to her usual chair. The room feels cool after the heat of the sun. "I'm sorry you're leaving tomorrow. I hoped your parents would relent and let you stay until the end of classes."

It's not a question of relenting. What's important is getting the wheat into the ground.

"I must say that you do know the catechism perfectly."

She should, she's recited the whole thing to him until she's blue in the face.

"You'll have no trouble at the service. Just make sure you've memorized the responses."

He doesn't need to say that. She's not going to make a fool of herself in front of all those people.

Lorna, Joy, and Agnes arrive together, as usual. She wonders what kind of secrets

they'd share if they were her friends. But maybe Dag will turn out to be a friend.

Father Penrose makes them recite the ten commandments again. He looks surprised when Callie's tongue stumbles over the fifth, 'honor thy father and thy mother.'

The rest of it isn't bad. She likes the golden rule, "do to all men as I would they should do unto me." Too bad Lillian hasn't learned that one yet.

Father Penrose says, "Any questions, girls?"

Callie says, "Why do women have to wear hats in church?"

She expects him to dismiss that question as frivolous, but he says, "The Bible says women must cover their heads to show respect to God."

Agnes raises a fat, dimpled hand. "Father, if God is all-powerful and all-knowing, He can see into our hearts and know we respect Him. So there's no need to wear a hat."

"Besides," Lorna says, "men don't wear hats in church."

Callie smiles. She hadn't expected support.

"The Bible says men must uncover their heads as a sign of respect," Father Penrose says.

"Why isn't it the same rule for both?" Callie asks.

Father Penrose says, "Men and women are different, therefore…"

Joy giggles into her hand.

"…the Bible has different rules for each." He frowns. "Wearing a hat or not wearing a hat are signs we are required to make. God knows what is in our hearts, but He wants us to make a special effort to show it."

When the session is over, Father Penrose shakes her hand at the door. "I look forward to seeing you at the confirmation service, Callie. At Sunday service before then if you can manage it."

"Thank you, Father."

She catches up to the others on the sidewalk. "I'm glad you wanted to know about the hat rule, too."

Lorna slides the barrette out of her short dark hair and puts it in her pocket. "It was good the way you kept asking him questions. Gotta keep old Rosie on his toes."

Rosie? Do they really call him Rosie?

Now that she's alone with them, she can't think of anything else to say. They walk away, toward the center of town, and Callie heads toward the Harris's, imagining what might happen if she went to church bareheaded. Not that she wants to go, bareheaded or not. It's impossible to imagine a God who cares about something so silly as whether or not to wear a hat in church.

Chapter Eleven

Callie's on the edge of the seat, her nose almost on the windshield, as the Fargo rattles along the valley road. She can't wait to get out and hug the cottonwoods, with their leaves dancing in the breeze, and greet the scattered sunbursts of dandelions shining in the grass. When the farmyard comes into view, it's a shock to see another house facing the road, halfway between hers and the barn. It's propped up on logs, tattered and sad, blue paint peeling, no screens on the windows.

"Is that Kjell's house?"

"They're moving in the end of June."

Lewis parks beside the workshop to unload barrels of gas. He hands her a shopping bag. "Take this with you. Some things your mother wanted."

She walks down the slope toward the houses. If the blue house isn't locked, she'll climb in and have a look.

Jake dances circles around her, jumping up to pull on her shirt sleeve.

"Good boy! Did you miss me?"

He talks to her in that half growl, half voice that dogs use, and she puts the bag and her suitcase down to rub his furry head. He prances a few feet away, turns and drops his front quarters to the ground, front legs splayed.

"I'll play with you in a minute, okay?"

He races to the other side of the wood pile, and she follows. The baby chicks! She kneels beside the pen. The little balls of yellow fluff are busy pecking at chopped hard-boiled eggs and running around flapping tiny stubs of wings. They look so cuddly.

Jake picks up a chick in his mouth. She holds her breath. A dog turned chicken-killer has to be shot.

He puts the chick down and picks up another, tail wagging, ears cocked forward.

Callie releases the pent-up breath. He just wants to play with them. The chicks mill around like fuzzy marbles, climbing over one another, paying no attention to the dog.

One of the chicks is limping and has a white, cotton bag tied on his foot. Callie captures him.

The screen door creaks, and Lillian says, "I suppose it was too much to expect you'd greet me before you started fooling with those creatures. Bring my things in here."

When Lewis and Lillian come back from Millburn, they don't say hello to her before they start dealing with animals, unpacking groceries, or making tea.

"What's wrong with that chick?"

"He has a gash in his foot. When we penned them under the kitchen stove the first night, the others tried to peck him to death."

"Does he have a name?"

"Don't be silly; he's only going to end up in the stew pot. Go unpack your suitcase."

She'll name the chick Limpy, even if chickens are awful creatures. They should help each other but they don't.

Exploring the new house will have to wait. Inside, she unpacks and sighs at the assignments piled on her table. School will have to wait, too; Lewis says if the weather holds, they'll start seeding tomorrow.

She pats her cot, runs her hand along the rows of books, looks out at the glossy

foliage on the willows. In the garden, the first dark green leaves of the potato plants are thrusting out of the black soil, uncurling to the sun. She heads for the back door.

"Before you go wandering off, get me some butter from the cream can," Lillian says. She's still scowling.

Whistling *Don't Fence Me In*, she goes to the water barrel beside the house. Just above it, Lewis dug a hole into the earth beneath the shallow stream and every spring, after the thaw, he sets a big cream can in it. The cold water swirls around the can, which is where Lillian keeps butter and milk and other things that spoil. It's not as handy as Cathleen's refrigerator but works just as well.

She leaves the butter on the kitchen table and heads for the barn. Martha scoots down the ladder and rubs against her ankles, purring. Up in the pasture, Buck lets her scratch his head, too. Rosie, suddenly skittish as a calf herself, raises her tail and frisks away, graceless as an army tank on legs. She thinks Callie and Jake have come to put her in the barn, and she doesn't want to go. The three horses won't let her get close either; afraid she wants them to work.

Beside the top gate, wild raspberry bushes are in bloom, white five-petaled flowers clustered on the thorny branches. She follows the fence southward, stopping now and then to gaze at the valley, grass-scented air and sunlight caressing her skin, Indian paint brush and glistening, golden buttercups at her feet. Before she'd read *Wild Flowers*, she thought the bright red tops of Indian paint brush were flowers. But they're actually a kind of leaf called bracts, soft and velvety under her fingers.

Down the hill, wild rose bushes wear delicate, pale pink roses with exquisite scent. Avoiding the brutal thorns, she picks a single bloom to take home and put in an eggcup. It won't last long, a day perhaps. She angles across the slope above the vegetable garden and stops to see how the young, transplanted willow is doing.

It takes her a full five minutes to find it. The grass has grown taller, and the willow is drooping, its leaves turning brown. She sits beside the sad little plant. The earth around it is dry, in spite of rain yesterday.

"You don't like it here, do you?" she whispers. "I'll move you back to the spring right now." Ten minutes later she puts the shovel back in the workshop. Even if the willow doesn't survive this second move, she knows now that some plants can't endure being transplanted.

She goes to the outhouse and hooks the door shut. When Lewis was building it, he asked for a dinner plate, saying it was the perfect size to measure the holes. Lillian said, 'What goes in must come out and I guess it makes sense to have the same space at both ends.'

Though she hates coming out here in winter darkness, it's not a bad place to be in summer. There are a few flies, but the smell isn't bad because Lewis pours lime in the pit and Lillian scrubs the seat and floor with strong soap. Or makes Callie do it.

She leaves the outhouse door ajar and heads across the narrow one-plank bridge over the spring to the house.

Lillian hands her an apron. "Since you like chocolate cake so much, here's your chance to learn how to make one. Get the yellow bowl, break two eggs into it and beat them until they're frothy."

She cracks eggs on the edge of the bowl and beats them, then drops the shells into a pan in the warming oven. The pan is full, ready for her to crush the shells into tiny bits

and take them out for the chickens to eat.

"Get the mixing spoon and stir in a cup of sugar."

So far, so good. Two eggs and one cup of sugar should be easy to remember until she can write it down.

"Fill the bowl to about here with milk."

Callie pours milk from the jug until it comes up to Lillian's pointing finger. "How much milk is that?"

"Never mind that now," Lillian says crossly. "Start stirring flour into the milk and egg mixture until it's the right consistency."

What's that mean?"

"If you'd watch me instead of having your nose in a book all the time, you'd know. When I was a girl, I loved learning from my mother." Lillian pours flour into the bowl. "Go do your homework and get out from under my feet."

Two eggs, one cup of sugar. Well, when the time comes, she'll buy a recipe book. It probably won't tell her everything she needs to know, but neither does Lillian. Or Lewis, either.

She wakes at 4:30 and can't go back to sleep. Today she and Lewis will tuck millions of plump wheat grains into the earth. With sun and rain and air, they'll soon send up tender shoots, giving the black earth a hazy overlay of shimmering green. Then — if it doesn't freeze, snow, or stay too dry — the shoots will surge upward, hiding the earth under a tender green sea of rippling wheat grass.

She puts on a jacket, slips out of the house, and climbs the steep eastern hill to watch sunrise pour light into the valley. She and Jake sit facing west, just below the brow of the hill, her hand resting on the collie's thick fur.

The sun rises at her back, the light moving down to the western slope. The first rays burnish the somber green of the jack pine ridge with a golden sheen, then glide slowly down to the fields, one black and ready to plant, another wearing the faded yellow of old stubble.

The pearly sky deepens to blue; above the horizon a star blinks once and fades. Light dances across the creek, illuminating the pale, fresh green of the willows and the flash of water in the twisting curls of the stream bed. Now the glow warms the farmhouse where wood smoke rises from the chimney, the new house sitting forlorn on its logs, the barn, the winter-weathered wood pile and, finally, lingers on the grassy knolls on the first easy slope below before moving up the gullies thick with young alder.

The chittering of sleepy birds in the trees swells to a song. The warming air releases the heady scent of new growth. Herron valley is awake.

Callie hurries down to the barn, half fills a lard pail with oats and heads up into the pasture again.

Rosie knows what the lard pail means. Instead of making Callie chase her across half a mile of steep gullies, she comes down the hill of her own free will, Buck trotting behind. Callie gives her enough to whet her appetite and the two animals follow her into the barn. She ties Rosie in her stall and shoves Buck into his pen.

Lewis walks in, milk bucket swinging in hand. "Mind your tongue this morning, your mother's cross."

"Because we're going to work on Sunday?"

"I reckon."

Breakfast is huge. Bad moods never affect Lillian's cooking. Eggs with orange yolks, thick-sliced bacon with chewy rinds, mounds of fried potatoes, toasted homemade bread with butter, Lillian's wild raspberry jam.

Afterward they drive up through the pasture to the field on the flat-topped hill, Jake racing behind. It's seven o'clock when Callie drops from the cab to drag open the barbed wire gate. Lewis fuels the tractor, cranks it into life and pulls the seed drill around behind the truck.

Callie climbs into the back of the truck and wades through the wheat, hard grains working their way down inside her socks and runners. She shovels the heavy grain into the hopper, muscles protesting. She'll be stiff tomorrow, but it's good to feel the strength in her back and arms.

Lewis chugs off down the field on the McCormick Deering, an oily pillow cushioning him against the steel seat, and Callie sits in the truck cab with *Anne of Green Gables*. The sun's warmth releases a mix of heady scents, grass, soil, wheat dust, leather, gas and oil, printer's ink. As the cab heats up, the paper sack holding their lunch sets free the smells of Cheddar cheese on brown bread, McIntosh apples and peanut butter cookies. Callie hushes her watering tongue and loses herself in Anne's fantasies and adventures.

When Lewis is ready to refill the drill, he stops and waves at her to bring the truck. Callie starts the engine and shoves it into gear, her palm sweating on the gearshift, checking twice to make sure she's in first, not third. It's so embarrassing when the truck stalls. She drives a hundred yards to the drill and bends her back to shoveling grain.

By midmorning flies are buzzing into the cab, drawn by the strong scent of cheese, and Callie closes the window to keep them out. Before sunrise, the thermometer read thirty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. Now it must be seventy-five outside. It feels like a hundred inside.

Next time Lewis stops for more grain, he checks his railroad watch and shuts down the tractor. They sit on the ground, leaning against the rear truck tire in the shade, and drink tea from a thermos. Funny how food tastes better out here than it does in Lillian's clean kitchen.

Lewis has a poker tongue today but there's no need for talk; she knows her job. And he can see the sunshine and blue sky for himself, the hawk circling above.

At noon they drive down to the house. Lillian must think she's feeding a threshing crew; there's meat and potatoes, carrots and peas, lemon pie for dessert. When they've eaten all that, she hands them a lunch bag filled with sandwiches and cookies, and a thermos of coffee.

She stalls the truck only once during the tranquil afternoon and no machinery breaks down. She finishes *Anne of Green Gables*, wondering why Anne didn't question the existence of God. Maybe she used up all her energy questioning other things.

By the time they quit at six, she's read one of Luke Short's westerns and started the second. Lewis's eyes shine bright blue out of his dust-covered face and, when he takes his hat off, his forehead is so pinky-white Callie almost laughs. Not until she looks in the tiny mirror in her mother's bedroom does she see that her own face is black.

Supper is another feast: roast chicken, baked potatoes, turnip, green beans, chocolate cake. She is so full she doesn't want her cake but struggles through it so she can eat the

icing, always saved for last.

"Have some more," says Lillian, "I made it for you."

"It's very good, but I can't. I'm stuffed."

"You can have a piece before bedtime."

Which comes early. Lewis wants to be seeding again by seven in the morning. Lillian stops doing her crossword puzzle at nine and puts out cookies and cake, sending Callie to the cellar to get a bottle of homemade ginger beer.

Ginger beer is delicious but if it gets shaken before the lid's off, most of it will fizz out. She carries it up the stairs carefully. The bite of ginger and smoothness of peanut butter cookies go together so well.

Lillian surveys her from the kitchen doorway, hands on hips. "You wouldn't eat my good cake at supper, but you'll eat those stale old cookies."

No matter how Lillian needles her, she's not going to let her ruin what has been a perfect day.

Callie sorts through her lessons and sighs. It's May thirty-first and only one month of school left. Or would be if she went to school in town. As it is, she's got three months of work to do in one if she wants to have the summer free. She looks out at the valley. She could take *Wild Flowers* and explore, looking for flowers. Or ride Silver as far as the lake.

"You'd better get on with your homework." Lillian is in the doorway. "You have a lot of catching up to do."

She wants to study, but it's hard going back to it after spending three weeks away for confirmation classes and seeding. Where should she start? Arithmetic, geography, English literature, grammar, history, physical education. All right, PE is the one subject she hates and the sooner she gets it over with, the sooner she can forget it.

Assignment 28: "The high jump: tie a string between two uprights, eighteen inches above the ground. Jump over the string from a standing start. Move the string upward in two-inch increments and, each time, keep a record of whether or not you were successful in jumping over without touching the string. Submit your record."

She imagines herself soaring like a swallow over the string. But where will she tie it? Ah, between the posts of the little wooden gate at the front of the house.

Ten minutes later, armed with twine, ruler, paper, and pencil, she examines the posts. They're only four feet tall and closer together than she'd like but there's no other place to do it. She probably can't jump four feet anyway.

She clears the twine at 18 inches. It's awkward jumping from a standing start; taking a run at it would be better. The exercise is much harder than she'd thought.

At 20 inches the toe of her running shoe catches on the twine and she stumbles as she lands, nearly falling. This is ridiculous; the lesson says three feet is a reasonable height to attain. She yanks the twine up to 24 inches, bends her knees, takes a deep breath, and launches herself toward the sky. This time she trips over the twine with both feet, falling hard on the grass.

A peal of laughter issues from the front room window. Lillian is watching.

Callie struggles to her feet.

"You are so clumsy!" Lillian wipes tears of laughter from her eyes. She turns her

head and calls, "Lewis, you should have seen her!"

Callie closes the gate and pulls the knots out of the twine, blinking and swallowing. She takes it back to the workshop and blows her nose before going into the house.

"What were you meant to be doing?" Lillian asks.

"A high jump."

Lillian starts laughing again and Callie retreats to her bedroom.

So what if she's clumsy? So what if she can't jump very high? She can lift her own weight, a hundred and twenty pounds. She can harness horses, shovel grain, and plant potatoes. Hammer in nails and drive a truck.

She looks at the other PE assignments. Broad jumps. Ha! Running. Skipping rope. Chinning herself. She'd bet all her blackjack pennies that Mrs. Harmon, the PE teacher, can't harness a horse.

She gets the picture of Rory Calhoun from her shoe box of treasures. His twinkling gray eyes say he wouldn't laugh at her high jumps. He'd like her just as she is.

It's a good thing she decided to do the PE assignments before the Rasmussens move in. It was bad enough with Lillian watching; she'd die if everybody laughed at her.

The assignments say what goals to aim for, which makes it easy. She begins with the high jump record. According to the lesson, she should be able to jump 36 inches.

Her pen stops halfway to the paper. She doesn't want to tell lies. But would these really be lies? If she practiced hard, she could learn to jump three feet and run at a certain speed and skip rope so many times a minute, but she doesn't want to do any of those things. It's not hurting anybody if she doesn't and she can spend that time on arithmetic and English, which are much more important. So maybe the reports would be lies, but they'd be true lies because, if she had to, she could make them be the truth.

The pen moves to the last line of the report. '*30 inches*.' That sounds about right; Mrs. Harmon might be suspicious if the figures are too high.

Chapter Twelve

Grasshoppers chirr beneath the clear blue June sky, calling to Callie through her open window. She closes her ears; if she doesn't finish her lessons soon, she won't have any summer holidays at all.

"How about helping me run the cultivator through the garden, kid?" Lewis says from the doorway.

Riding Dolly while Lewis guides the hand cultivator isn't any fun. But it's hard for him to do alone and at least she'll be outside for a little while.

Half an hour of doing the splits on Dolly's round, fat barrel of a body and she's more than ready to go back to her struggle with England's history. It's easy to keep Dolly at a steady pace heading away from the buildings but, when they turn back, Dolly can see the barn and tries to trot. It takes all Callie's strength to hold her to a sedate walk.

When the carrots, cabbages, and beets are done, they start on two rows of onions. It's odd that raw onions taste so sharp, cooked ones so sweet. Wait a minute. A raw onion can grow new onions, which means it's alive. So, it's not surprising that a live onion bites back when it's bitten. Not all vegetables do that, though.

They've done four rows of potatoes when Kjell's red pickup, trailing a cloud of dust, stops at the gate, followed by Russell's blue one.

"How come they're here today?"

Lewis picks up a small rock and throws it over the fence. "Putting a foundation under Kjell's house."

She'd like to watch but the garden must be done, and she'd rather fight Dolly than use the hoe to slash weeds and hill potatoes. She digs her heels into Dolly's flanks, urging the mare from a crawl to a normal walk.

At noon Callie takes Dolly to the barn and strips off her harness. Turned loose, the mare trots up into the pasture, whickering, looking for Dinah.

In the house, Lillian is setting the table. "You should have been in here helping me. Go call the men for dinner. And change your slacks. You smell like horse."

When Callie says dinner is ready, Russell and Lewis head for the house but Kjell walks over to his red pickup. "Come and look in the cab."

A dog! Medium-sized, with short smooth sandy hair, a pointed nose like a collie's and perky ears, sitting on the front seat. When he sees her, he jumps up, squirming and wriggling, wagging his skinny tail.

"This is Skipper. Think it's safe to let him out?"

"Sure. Oh, he's adorable! What kind is he?"

Kjell laughs. "Pure mutt. And he's still a kid; only a year old." He opens the door and Skipper's supple body flows out of the cab to wriggle around their legs.

Jake, ears forward, trots over to investigate the newcomer. They circle each other, sniffing.

"Collies can be mean," Kjell says.

"Jake likes everybody." The dogs chase each other around the wood pile, tails wagging.

Kjell and the dog sort of match, with their sandy hair and hazel eyes. She'll have to look at Skipper's eyes and see if they're crossed, like his master's.

Kjell follows her into the house. "Mrs. McKenzie," he says, "That food sure smells good."

Lillian beams and heaps his plate with stew and mashed potatoes. The conversation touches on the weather, the roads, and the price of wheat, mixed with compliments to Lillian for the food. When coffee's poured, they get down to business.

Kjell says, "I figure on starting to clear land the next day or two. Getting a tractor and plow and some gas hauled out here tomorrow."

"When do Dot and your boy arrive?" Lillian asks.

"End of the month. They're coming up by train."

That's only two weeks away. She's been studying hard, unaware of time passing. Now she wants to walk over every foot of the valley, follow the stream to the lake, touch the rocks and plants she knows so well. Like a dog peeing to mark its territory. Well, the valley does belong to her, in a way that it can't belong to anyone else.

Lillian cuts apple pie, giving the biggest piece to Kjell. "Would you like to stay here until Dot comes?"

Lewis looks startled, then frowns. Maybe he doesn't want Kjell underfoot in the house. The Rasmussens will be living right in the yard soon enough.

"Sure would make it easier for me," Kjell says. "I have to go back to town tonight, but if I could bring my toothbrush tomorrow, that would be a fine thing."

"Think nothing of it. We'd be glad to have you. It's only a cot in the attic, mind. Nothing grand."

The invasion has already begun. Kjell's taking over one of her favorite retreats.

"You mind Skipper being here, too?" Kjell asks.

"Not at all, long as he doesn't bother the chickens. Here, have another piece of pie."

"Don't mind if I do." He smiles at Lillian. "This is the best apple pie I ever ate."

"Go on with you! What a lot of blarney!" But she's pleased. Her face is pink, and her eyes are shining.

Russell shoves his chair back, rises, and hitches his pants up. "Well, time's a wasting. Let's get at her."

Callie asks, "Can I help?"

"Better not," Russell says. "Don't want the house to fall on you. Anyway, this job takes a lot of muscle."

Lillian scowls at her. "You can dry the dishes and then get back to your books."

When Russell says something, Lillian acts like God has spoken. It's irritating; building things is fun, and she might learn more about using tools.

When they moved here, she helped Lewis build the house and barn and two granaries. The new fir lumber smelled good but the rolled roofing stunk of tar and was covered with grit that hurt when she knelt on it. That's when she learned how to use a hammer and pull on crooked boards so Lewis could nail them in straight.

"Get a dry dish towel; that one's sopping wet." Lillian pushes her toward the sideboard.

The only bad thing about building was being on the scaffold. It was only six feet high but every time she looked down, she felt dizzy, her stomach clenched, and her body leaned outward as though it wanted to fall. She'd crawled on hands and knees to get from one end to the other, no matter how Lewis teased and Lillian laughed. If she's going to walk on something that high, it has to be wider than a twelve-inch plank.

There's a shrill cheeping at the back door and Callie hurries into the shed to open it. Limpy is bigger now but still covered in fuzzy yellow down, his foot still in the cotton bag. She cuddles him in her hands. He settles down, his beak resting on her thumb, and falls asleep.

Lillian says, "I told you not to make a pet of that bird. He's only going to end up being dinner someday."

"I know, but he's so sweet." Amazing how tame he'd become and how much he trusted humans. "The way he asks to come in, it's like he thinks he's human, too."

"He probably thinks humans are just big chickens. If he thinks at all."

Lewis opens the back door. "Somebody better come out and have a look at these dogs." His tone is ominous.

Callie takes Limpy outside. Jake and Skipper are panting and looking pleased with themselves. She slaps a hand over her nose as the stench of putrid flesh brings her dinner up into her throat. "They've been rolling in rotten fish on the creek bank!"

"Damn dogs!" Lillian says. "I thought I'd have an hour to put my feet up. Help me fill the wash tub. Your father should have buried the offal instead of leaving it for the wild animals. Those dogs are filthy."

Why didn't the foxes and birds finish what was left of the suckers? Maybe she and Lewis should build a pen for the dogs so they can't get into trouble. No, that's not fair; they're entitled to freedom the same as her. She just wishes they didn't like to roll in rotten fish.

She helps Lillian carry the tub outside, puts it on the grass and holds her nose again. "Come on, Jake."

Jake has been down this road before and is having none of it. He dances away, tail wagging, with what almost looks like a smile on his face, and Callie grabs Skipper instead.

"Oh, God!" Lillian holds her arm against her nostrils. "He's absolutely revolting."

The dog wriggles and twists like a panic-stricken garter snake, but she manages to hold him down while Lillian scrubs and towels him. Turned loose, he races around and rubs his shoulders and chin on the grass.

"Jake!" Lillian roars. The dog's tail droops as he edges toward her. "He knows I mean business. You bad dog!"

After they finish bathing him, Callie sits on her haunches, letting the dirty water soak into the ground, and watching the leaves on the poplar trees across the road twist and shimmer in a light breeze. A coil of dust rises from the road, veers back and forth, then whirls into the grass. The whirlwind must want to rub the dust off the same way the dogs want to rub dampness off their fur.

"Rinse that tub out well," Lillian says. "I think we'd better have a bath ourselves tonight."

"This isn't Saturday."

"I know that. But it will be very inconvenient for us to have baths while Kjell's here."

By late afternoon, Callie's done a history assignment and the men have finished the foundation. She examines the skirting around the bottom. She could have done that part if one of them had shown her how.

"You'll stay for supper, won't you?" Lillian stands beside Russell, admiring the men's handiwork.

"Not this time, Ma. Rita's expecting me home."

"I'd like to," Kjell says, "but I've got business in town." He turns to Callie. "And I figure on beating the pants off you at crib the next couple of weeks."

"Don't count on it."

Kjell's laugh makes her feel like a grownup who's made a funny remark, not a child who's said something cute.

Lillian frowns. "Callie, don't be rude."

"Mrs. McKenzie, I'm sorry about Skipper rolling in the fish. If I hadn't been holding up half the house, I'd have bathed him myself."

"Oh, that's all right. These things happen." Lillian is all smiles again. "And call me Lillian. I don't think we need to be so formal."

"I'd be honored." Kjell ducks his head at her. "Would you mind keeping Skipper? The hotel doesn't allow dogs. I hate leaving him in the truck all night."

"He'll be fine here. We'll look after him." Lillian reaches up to fluff her hair.

How funny! Lillian smiles at Kjell almost the same way she does at Russell.

Kjell squats and rubs Skipper all over while the dog wiggles in ecstasy. "See you tomorrow, big fella. Behave yourself now." Skipper follows him to the pickup but comes back to sit beside Jake when Kjell starts the motor.

The pickups disappear in a cloud of dust and Lewis looks up at the sky. "Need some rain."

"We're all going to have baths tonight," Lillian says. "That's sure to make it rain."

"Tonight?" Lewis eyes her. "Maybe you could give me a haircut, too."

Callie wonders if their bed will creak after she's supposed to be asleep. It always does on bath night.

Flowering Earth says a bit about how plants reproduce, with stamens and pistils and pollen, but is it the same for humans? If she had a microscope, she could see the details of how plants do it, but Lillian and Lewis sure aren't going to let her watch them doing it.

At eight Lillian puts the tin washtub on the stove and Callie fills it with water from the spring. When it's hot, they set it on a mat on the kitchen floor.

"Your father gets first go, then it's your turn." Lillian puts a towel on the floor to serve as a mat, soap, and a drying towel on a chair beside the tub. "Get on with your studying and don't come out until he says you can."

Lillian doesn't have to tell her that; she knows Lewis likes privacy. Callie sits at her desk and listens to him splash, imagining him sitting in the tub with his knees bent over the edge, his feet resting on the floor towel. When he's done, maybe he'll help Lillian fill the tub with fresh water instead of calling her to do it.

She looks at her English assignment, then puts it back on the pile. Skipper, shut in the shed for the night, whimpers now and then and the wind is restless, too. The willows in the gully creak and bend, and somewhere an owl gives a single mournful hoot.

Chapter Thirteen

At 7:30 in the morning, the sun is already hot. Callie helps Lewis hitch the team to the wagon and tosses her work gloves in the back with the pitchfork, shovel and gas can. Lewis stops at the house so she can get their lunch bag.

Lillian marches out the back door. "And just where do you think you're going, miss?" She avoids Callie's outstretched hand and gives the lunch bag to Lewis. "You get back here in the house. You're helping me today."

"But I helped you the last two days." Lewis has been clearing Kjell's land for a week and she's only been allowed to go with him three times.

"Don't answer back!" Lillian switches to her tired voice. "You are a most peculiar child. Here you have a chance to be with me and do proper women's work and all you want to do is grub outside with the men."

Callie climbs down and opens the gate for Lewis. He clucks to the mares. The team sets off, Jake in the lead, across the road and down the slope toward the log bridge over Herron Creek, the wagon swaying and creaking over the uneven trail. Dolly and Dinah switch their tails at flies and toss their heads, making the harness jingle. She watches them go, her throat tight, tears filming her eyes.

"Bring in some water and fill the boiler. Then go change the sheets on the beds."

She'd forgotten it was Monday. Wash day. Doing the laundry will take all morning and she'll be ironing all afternoon. A complete waste of a perfect summer day.

Lillian comes in to help make the double bed. Callie shakes a feather pillow into a fresh cover and wonders what Lillian would do if she got it flung in her face. But if she works hard, maybe Lillian will let her go with Kjell tomorrow. He's meeting Dorothy and Dag at the train station in Dawson Creek, but he can let her off at Russell's in Fort St. John. Tomorrow is July 1, Dominion Day, and Russell said there'd be a parade through town, then a picnic and bonfires down at the Peace River, maybe even fireworks.

"Can I go to town tomorrow to see the parade?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I say so, that's why!" Lillian's angry voice, the one that raises blisters on your insides. "You haven't finished school yet. Work comes first."

"I've only got four assignments left."

"Don't be so selfish. Kjell won't be back until Wednesday and there's no room for you at Russell's. He'd have to bring you back tomorrow night and I'm sure he has better things to do."

"Couldn't we go in Kjell's pickup?" Kjell is taking Lewis's big truck so he can bring the furniture back.

"No, we could not," Lillian snaps. "Your father won't drive it in case he has an accident." She brushes a strand of hair off her forehead. "He wouldn't want to go anyway."

"Don't you want to go?"

"That's beside the point. Go get more water." Lillian dumps a load of dirty clothes on the shed floor and starts putting them in the washing machine.

Callie walks to the spring, empty pails swinging in her hands and a burning behind

her breastbone, a wild storm in her head. The green valley lies serene under the hot sun, bathed in light and air, grasshoppers singing to each other.

She drops the pails and jumps across the spring. Her feet seem to move of their own accord, climbing through the fence, running south toward the lake, stumbling down through the brush until she's hidden in the willows along the creek.

Legs shaking, muscles weak, she flops on the grass, face turned to the sky. Above, a hawk circles, seeking prey, ready to streak toward the ground like a feathered bullet. In the distance, Lillian's voice. Callie can't hear the words, but she knows they're aimed at her.

The world will crash around her in flames and noise, Lillian's voice harsh and screaming like the hawk's.

But she's not going back.

Cloud wisps hang motionless on the horizon. She could play with sky dreams, imagine riding the clouds. But her mind is too ruffled, too full of thunder and lightning.

She turns her head. Six inches from her nose is a delicate pale blue flower dangling upside down from a threadlike stem. Blue columbine? Mr. Stack says they like rocky slopes and it's not rocky here, but the flower does have the five long pointed spurs that look like an eagle's talons. The columbine stem seems too thin to bear the flower but it's tough and resilient under her fingers.

Her body in command of itself again, she sits up. She'll go to Kjell's field and work with Lewis, which is what she'd wanted to do anyway. Maybe he'll stick up for her this time.

A rustling in the bushes startles her and Skipper emerges, his tail wagging.

"Oh, you silly dog!" She hugs him, lets him lick her face. Did he follow her, or did Lillian bring him? Is her mother walking down the road, looking for her?

She jumps the creek, runs across the flats, the heat bringing a fine film of sweat to her face. Halfway to Kjell's land, she looks back.

No one in sight. And no matter what happens to her later, she's going to spend the rest of the day beyond the reach of Lillian's voice.

The mares are tethered in a grove of poplar trees near Kjell's pickup. He's far down the field on his new red tractor, the plow turning over a strip of black sod along the edge of the property. Jake lollops beside it, chasing mice as they flee the big rubber-tired wheels. Skipper races to catch up with his buddy. Kjell might be upset; he says the dog has no sense around machinery.

Lewis is two hundred yards away, chopping down saplings. She takes her gloves out of the wagon and walks toward him. When she's twenty feet away, he turns and sees her, his mouth opening in surprise.

"Anything wrong?"

"No."

"Your mother send you up here?"

"No."

He nods, his face clearing. "You had a fight."

"No. I just walked out. I want to work outside, not in the house." She looks at the valley, the fields. She can't find the right words to tell him how she feels, how much she loves it.

He gazes at the valley, too, for a moment, then back at her, the blue of his eyes soft as

a spring sky. "You're too much like me. But you'll survive."

He takes off one stained leather glove and massages his stubbled jaw, his face returning to its normal closed, calm expression. "She's going to be riled."

"I know." She wonders again what he did long ago that still makes Lillian mad. It had to be worse than what she's just done. Probably much worse. But she can't imagine Lewis doing anything bad.

He lets his gaze drift over Kjell's half section. "I've got more than I can handle trying to keep ahead of Kjell. You better stay."

The winds of anger in her head die down. He could have sent her home, but he didn't; it's going to be a good day after all. And it's true that he needs help.

The valley had been burnt over a few years before they came, so there are no big trees. But hundreds of charred logs have to be piled up and burned, young trees cut down, rocks moved. Great patches of pink-purple fireweed light the gentle slope, bees mumbling in the blossoms as they harvest nectar.

"Let's get a pile ready to burn this afternoon," Lewis says. "There's no wind today."

Even if last year's dry grass catches a spark, the fire can't go anywhere. The strip of plowed earth around the perimeter of the field is thirty feet wide and gets wider every time Kjell makes a circuit.

She still has nightmares about the grass fire at Poplar Ridge when she was little. Acrid gray smoke rolled across the pasture, dulling the sun to a red blur and hiding the buildings in choking swirls. Eyes smarting, throat burning, she fought the terror scorching her flesh. The whole family had worked at beating back the flames with wet burlap sacks. They'd saved the buildings, but it had been a near thing.

She and Lewis work in silence, lugging brush and piling it up, carrying heavy logs and heaving them on top of the pile. Bluebells on slender stems dot the grass like tiny pieces of sky and she tries not to step on them. It would be great if she could put one in her box of treasures and have it stay fresh and blue forever. But it would wither, like all uprooted plants.

When she heads for another log, Lewis says, "Leave that one. It's too heavy to carry this far. We'll build another pile over it later. I'm going to chop those down." He points to a half dozen quaking aspens. "See if you can get that big rock out. I dug away the dirt around it."

She removes the doubletree from the wagon tongue, hitches it to the horses and fastens a heavy chain to the ring in the center. Clucking to the mares, she maneuvers them in front of the rock that had been buried mostly beneath the surface. She hooks the chain around it, urges the mares ahead and they strain against the harness, dragging the rock out of its lair onto level ground. The chain holds and she guides them across the plowed earth to the property line.

"Whoa!" The mares stop and she unhooks the chain. She sights along the rocks already piled beside the first furrow. It would be fun to build a stone wall instead of a barbed wire fence, but that would take forever and there aren't enough stones anyway.

She drags rocks to the fence line until Lewis hollers, "Bring the team over here!" He's finished cutting the trees down and wants to pull the stumps out. Any roots left in the ground will be kicked to the surface by the plow. Who will pick roots when the plowing is done? Who will use the team and stoneboat to pick the smaller rocks? Maybe Dag. He's a city boy, though, and she'll have to teach him how. Maybe he'll have things to

teach her, too.

There's no breeze to cool the sun's heat and she'd like to roll up her shirt sleeves, but mosquito season has begun. She's as covered as she can be; knee socks, runners, jeans, long-sleeved shirt buttoned up to the throat, but she's already been bitten on her hands and face.

The tractor roars to a stop beside them and Kjell climbs down, wiping his grimy forehead on the sleeve of his shirt. They sit on the shady side of the tractor. Lillian packed cake and oranges as well as tuna sandwiches and cookies, more than enough for all of them.

Kjell glances at her. "You work damn hard."

She ducks her head to hide the flush of pleasure on her cheeks and gives Jake the piece of tuna he's been eyeing. She repeats Kjell's words in her mind, basking in them. Besides, getting the land ready for planting makes her feel like she's accomplished something. Doing the wash is just work and has to be done over again every week.

After coffee, Kjell starts the tractor and moves off. The plow slices into grassy sod and the black furrow turns up and rolls to lie beside its mates. Laced with pale roots of grass, Indian paintbrush and fireweed, the earth smells rich and moist, full of life.

At noon she hitches the horses to the wagon, but shakes her head when Lewis motions her to climb in. "I'll stay here and keep working. I'm not hungry." A pure lie.

He slaps the reins on the mares' backs. "I'll bring you a sandwich." Jake hesitates, looking from her to the receding wagon and back again.

"Go on," she says. He's always happiest on the move. One more puzzled look in her direction and he races off after the team and wagon.

A few moments later, Kjell stops the tractor and heads toward his pickup. "You want a ride to the house?"

"No. I brought dinner with me." Another lie.

"Well, don't knock yourself out now."

She splashes gasoline in the dry branches at the base of the pile, now over ten feet high. She still can't light a kitchen match with just one flick of a thumb nail, the way Lewis does, but on the fifth try it flares and she tosses it into the gasoline-soaked branches. The flames shoot up with a satisfying whoosh.

The gas can goes back under the poplars and she brings the pitchfork to the fire and leans on it. Once the big logs catch, all she has to do is rake stray branches into the flames. Everything has to burn to ashes, otherwise they have to move the leftover chunks to the next pile.

Maybe Lillian is going to burn her to ashes. Every time she thinks about what might happen, the queasy feeling in her stomach grows stronger. She reminds herself that hailstorms don't last forever, and neither will Lillian's rage. But it's terrifying while it's happening.

The logs are burning well when Lewis gets back with Jake and the team. Kjell drives up, climbs on the tractor and heads down the field, dust rising behind him.

Lewis hands her a paper bag. "She made you a cheese sandwich. Said if that wasn't enough, you could starve."

"Is she really mad?"

He nods. "She had to do the washing on her own."

But that's proper women's work. Lillian should have enjoyed every minute of it.

"Did she wonder where I was?"

"No. She saw you hiking up the hill."

She leaves the pitchfork standing in the ground and spends half an hour helping Lewis build the next pile. "You might as well fire this one, too," he says. "I'll move along. The ground's pretty clear here."

Looking after two fires keeps her busy and the heat brings tears to her eyes. Sometimes the smoke shifts, surrounding her and forcing her to retreat, coughing. But it keeps the flies and mosquitoes away.

By coffee time, fire has consumed most of the dry wood. Even the green aspens are burning, leaves shriveling in the flames, snapping off and drifting away. She sits in the scant shade of the tractor, the sun beating down and metal in the engine pinging. Hard to imagine the valley shrouded in winter snow and icy temperatures. By that time the field will have been well worked over with the disk and harrow, ready for seeding next spring.

She feeds the last bite of her cheese sandwich to Jake, who has elected to stay with her instead of following the tractor. She doesn't feel like wrestling any more logs today, either. It's good to just stand, her gloved hands resting on top of the pitchfork and her chin resting on her hands, and stare into the fire.

The logs are embers now, with occasional flickers of yellow and blue as flames reach up to tongue the new twigs she tosses in. She remembers the magazine picture of the marble fireplace, glowing with coals, easy chairs around it, the mother and daughter touching. Yanking the pitchfork from the ground, she strides to the fire and rakes the embers closer together, heedless of the sparks flying up, pretending it's the smoke bringing tears to her eyes.

On the way home, her body jarred by every rut and hummock under the wagon wheels, all she can think about is what Lillian might do. How bad will it be?

Lewis pulls the team over to let the pickup go by. When the dust has settled, he clucks to the mares. "It's a waste of money driving that truck to the field every day. He could ride with us in the wagon."

"He likes driving it." She would, if she had a chance.

"Huh! Young people are all in such a damn hurry these days. Wasn't that way when I was a boy." He tells her about growing up on a New Brunswick farm. His family was poor; he had to quit school after fourth grade and work in the bush for money.

She wishes she could ask him about sailing to England and fighting in the first World War. It must have been terrible. Last winter he'd started reading a novel about the second World War and, after a few pages, stalked to the heater and thrown the book into the flames. "Son of a bitching writer sure as hell never saw a war!"

The way she feels right now, World War Two can't be any worse than facing Lillian.

She's shaky and weak-kneed when they walk into the house, but Lillian just gives her a look and ladles out beef stew, mashed potatoes, turnips, and peas. She won't make a big fuss in front of Kjell.

After supper the men go out, Kjell to grease his truck and change the oil, and Lewis to look after the animals.

Here it comes.

Lillian doesn't even shout. "I'm disappointed in you. You're a very ungrateful and disobedient child. I don't know what I've done to deserve such treatment."

This is not the storm she expected. Why isn't Lillian shouting, her face red, that

frightening flicker of flames around her head? She decides to risk the question that's been in the back of her mind all day.

"Why can't you say 'please' to me instead of ordering me around like a slave?"

"Please! Why should I say 'please' to you?" Lillian's face begins to flush. "You're just a child. And a very foolish one. You have to learn how to be a proper woman and women do not grub in the dirt like men."

Lillian grubs in the garden.

"It makes me very sad to have such an ungrateful and thoughtless child. You can thank your lucky stars you have food in your belly and a roof over your head, since you won't thank me."

This is really strange. Lillian sounds like she's looking for sympathy.

"You've done yourself out of a treat." Lillian pours boiling water into the dish pan. "If you'd behaved today, I was going to let you go to town with Kjell tomorrow."

I'll bet you were!

"As it is, you can stay home and scrub all the floors tomorrow and do what I say with no back talk. No wasting time on your silly stories or that flower book, either. Now, get a dish towel and dry these dishes."

Missing the parade doesn't matter a lot. It's such a relief Lillian isn't raging and screaming that she doesn't mind anything very much.

She'd better not let Lillian catch her working on the Amazon fairy story again, or reading *Flowering Earth*.

She almost drops a plate at the next thought. What if Lillian decides to punish her by burning the story? Or her flower books?

After chores, she has a bath in her room. Like the men, she came home covered in dust and soot and streaked with charcoal from the old burned logs. It feels good to be clean, but her mosquito bites itch worse than ever.

The fear of what Lillian might do nags as much as the bites. Her mother just isn't acting normal.

As she's writing in her diary, she remembers Russell and Lewis describing fat women as 'two axe handles across the rear.' That's better than 'Black Witch.'

Two Axe wouldn't let me go with Lewis this morning and I…

Finished, she takes the flower and mushroom books from her table and puts them on the bottom shelf of the bookcase where Lillian won't notice them. She tucks the fairy story inside her shirt and heads for the back door.

"Where are you going?" Lillian's heating another tub of water on the stove so the men can have a bath, too.

"To the outhouse."

"Well, don't go wandering off. You'll have to get to bed early. You're going to be busy tomorrow."

Yeah, doing proper women's work when she could be helping Lewis with machinery and learning something.

She leaves the outhouse and stops at the workshop to wrap the story in a scrap of oilcloth as protection from mice. In the barn, she climbs the ladder to the musty warmth

of the loft and hides her parcel in a dark corner well away from the dwindling pile of oat sheaves. Before they put the new crop of oats in, she'll have to find a different hiding place.

Martha strolls out from behind the sheaves, a faint mewling following her. Kittens!

Martha leads her to them and curls around three blind, groping kittens. Two are gray, one smaller than the other, and one is tortoiseshell. Martha licks the kittens, who inch their way to her teats and settle in to feed while she purrs like the McCormick Deering.

It must be wonderful to be cuddled and purred at. Will the small kitten survive? Sometimes they don't.

The kittens are too tiny to be touched yet. Another few days and Martha will let her hold them. She watches for a few minutes, wondering if she can hide them from Lewis. It doesn't seem likely; once they're big enough to run around, he's bound to see them.

"Keep the mice away from my story, okay? I have to go now, or I'll be in trouble again. I'll sneak you some food when I can."

She crawls down the ladder and hurries toward the house. As she passes Kjell's, she wonders what it will be like when Dorothy and Dag move in. She unlatches their back door and walks through the stale, empty rooms, her footfalls hollow and spooky. Her house is little, but it feels bigger than this. It's good that both their front room windows face the road; they won't be able to see each other in the evening. Kjell's bedroom windows face her house, but all anyone can see from there is the shed and the attic window above it.

"Callie?" Kjell walks in the back door and closes it behind him. "Came to see what was taking you so long. We're having our championship crib game tonight, you know."

They've played crib every night and she's kept a record of how many games each has won. As of last night, they were even steven. She'd forgotten they were going to play tonight. Lillian won't be pleased.

"I bet I'll win."

"How much are you willing to bet?" He puts his arm around her shoulders, gives them a squeeze and pulls her over so she's snug against his side. It feels good and he smells of soap and water, with a faint overlay of smoke, like Lewis. She hasn't had a hug since forever.

"I don't know. A nickel?"

He pats his pocket. "I think I can afford that." He gives her shoulders another squeeze, then turns abruptly toward the door. "Come on." Outside, he gestures toward the workshop and lean-to. "What's the story with your Dad and those old bones?"

The question makes her uneasy, but his hug still warms her skin. "He wants to see if he can build a whole elk skeleton. It's a kind of hobby, I guess."

"Yeah?" Kjell's good eye looks down at her, his crossed eye staring into the distance. It sounds like he doesn't believe her. Kjell should ask Lewis about the bones. It's not fair to ask her something when she doesn't know the answer. She heads toward her house, walking fast.

At the end of the evening, she wins the crucial game by luck, pegging out just ahead of him because it's her turn to count first. Gleeful, she pockets her nickel.

"Don't gloat; that's childish." Lillian puts glasses of ginger beer down for them and a plate of cookies. "You shouldn't be playing for money, anyway. It's not nice."

"I put her up to it," Kjell says. "I bet a nickel." He raises his glass to her. "Here's to

the champion."

They clink glasses and grin at each other. Kjell sticking up for her is like having Russell home again.

"Just the same," Lillian says, "gambling is gambling, even if the stakes are only a nickel. I don't want her growing up thinking that betting is acceptable. Bad enough that Lewis encourages her with blackjack."

It's fun playing for money, but she knows betting is not a good thing because she almost always loses.

The sun has set, but the air is still hot and muggy, her bites itchy. As she puts on pajamas, a mosquito floats out of nowhere and hovers near her nose, its whine grating on her ears like a knife on a dry grindstone. Like Lillian's voice telling her she's ungrateful and stupid.

Hell and damnation! The bites she got today will itch and burn forever. She can't talk back to Lillian, but that little bastard of a mosquito is going to get it. She rolls a newspaper into a weapon.

The mosquito dances through the air to the window and she stalks it. Her muscles tense as she raises her arm for the kill.

"Callie! What are you doing?"

She jumps, drops the newspaper. Lillian stands in the doorway. "Don't smear that insect all over my clean windows! A mosquito bite won't kill you. Go to sleep." Her footsteps fade into the other bedroom.

The enemy has disappeared. She stares at the walls, the window, the cot. She looks down at her pajamas, feels the back of her neck underneath her braids.

She could swear it's walking over her skin, tickling, taunting her. She scratches, slapping at her legs, her arms, making the skin smart, but there's nothing there. Thunder rumbles in the west.

Armed with the newspaper, she sits on the bed, leaning against the wall so the mosquito can't get her from behind. It should be singing now that it has a victim. She holds her breath, listening for that penetrating, monotonous hum. The thunder rolls closer.

The mosquito might have slipped out through the screen. She gets into bed, throwing off the blankets and pulling the sheet over her head, but that doesn't work. She's smothering, and twangy as tightly strung barbed wire. She goes to the kitchen and splashes cold water on her face.

When she comes back, the mosquito is whining somewhere near the window. She chases it, swatting at random and bumping into things.

"Callie, stop fussing about that mosquito and get to bed." Lillian's voice is sharp.

Callie hunts, whirling around every two paces in case it's behind her. Back and forth, checking walls and curtains, ceiling, and floor, straining to see a movement, waiting for the faint hum to start again.

Something feathers her ankle. She swats at it, heart racing. Only the damn blanket hanging off the cot! Every square inch of tender, sweating skin feels bare and vulnerable.

She can't give up. The little bugger is just waiting until she closes her eyes before it

whines in her ear and bites. She's got to get it before it gets her.

Thunder cracks over the house and she turns toward the window. The mosquito is on her desk, poised on the writing pad, black against the white paper, flexing its wings. She could swear it's staring at her, gloating.

Gloating is childish.

She lifts the rolled newspaper and brings it down hard as the first volley of rain hits the window. A smear of body and thin black legs stick to the paper.

Freedom. Silence.

She closes the window against the rain and slides into bed. The air is finally cooling.

What does 'bugger' mean? It's not in her dictionary. 'Bastard' is, but she can't understand why it's a swear word. Anyway, they both start with 'b', which makes them good swear words because she can get a lot of feeling into the sound. If mosquito started with 'b' she could spit that out like a proper swear word, too. Bosquito! Billian!

Chapter Fourteen

Callie stands on a chair, fidgeting, while Lillian pins up the hem of the white cotton broadcloth dress she's making for the confirmation service.

"Hold still! You'll get a pin stuck in you."

She bites her lip, listening for the truck. Kjell's bringing Dorothy and Dag home today. It's already mid-afternoon and she can't imagine what's taking them so long.

Lillian stands back and inspects her handiwork. "All right, that'll do. Be careful taking the dress off; you don't want to scratch yourself."

She yanks the dress over her head and a pin in the hem catches her upper arm. A jolt of fear deadens the pain. If she bleeds into the soft material, flames brighter than blood will flare around Lillian's head.

But it's only a surface scratch, no blood. She hurries into her jeans and shirt. The house smells of vinegar and soap; there's not a speck of dust anywhere. She realizes that scrubbing the floors yesterday wasn't a punishment; Lillian wanted a spotless house for Dorothy's arrival and would have made her do it anyway. Lillian's bound to think up something else mean to do to her, though.

The clock on the sideboard says five when the familiar rumble of the Fargo invades the yard.

"Oh, my goodness, they're here!" Lillian's face is flushed, and she's so flustered she can't get the knot in her apron ties undone. "Callie, untangle this for me."

She loosens the knot. Lillian hangs the apron on a nail in the shed and hurries out the back door. Callie follows, startled by the sight of her mother's hands fluttering at her throat.

Lillian must be excited about seeing her sister. Twenty-seven years is practically forever. She's made a Sunday dinner, too, even though this is Wednesday. Roast pork, which she and Lewis made a special trip to Fort St. John to get, and fresh apple sauce, potatoes and carrots done around the roast and her famous lemon meringue pie.

Lewis has been outside, greasing the wagon wheels, so he gets to open the truck door for Dorothy and Dag while Skipper squirms and wags his tail and runs in circles. A heavy woman with short brown hair like Lillian's, except there's no gray in it, swings her legs out and takes Lewis's hand to step down. A tall, thin boy follows her.

She hasn't seen a picture of Dag since he was eight or nine and he's not what she expected. He doesn't look like Kjell at all except for hazel eyes. He's as tall and skinny as she is and has dark curly hair. His teeth gleam white against olive skin.

Lillian gives Dorothy the same bright smile she gives Russell and says, "My baby sister, all grown up!" They hug each other. This is a strange sight. Lillian says she doesn't believe in acting mushy.

"And this must be little Callie," Dorothy says, bearing down on her with arms outstretched. She has the same pale blue eyes as Lillian and Callie shrinks inside. But Lillian never hugs strangers, never wears slacks or running shoes. Dorothy's firm arms press her against an ample bosom the way she imagines the mother beside the marble fireplace does with her daughter. Her throat tightens. Then the image fades as her delighted nose informs her that her aunt does something else Lillian frowns on. Dorothy smokes. So that was one of Lillian's lies; decent women do smoke.

"You're not as little as I thought." Dorothy holds her at arm's length. "In fact, you look almost grown up. And pretty, too. That sweater I knit for your birthday must be far too small."

"She's growing like a bad weed," Lillian says.

Dag holds his hand out and, solemn faced, shakes hands with Lillian.

"Well," Lillian says, beaming at him, "you are a fine big boy." She looks at Dorothy. "He must look like his mother; I don't see anything of Kjell in him."

"He looks like himself," Dorothy says. "Dag, this is your cousin Callie."

He nods at her, but she can't think of a thing to say. He's good-looking, his skin clear and smooth. She'd give anything to have curly hair like that.

"Come in, everyone." Lillian turns to Callie. "Go get the table set."

"I want to unload the truck," Kjell says. "Shouldn't take us more than half an hour." Lewis follows him.

"And I want to have a quick look at my new home," Dorothy says. "Come with me, Dag, and you can pick which bedroom you want. I'll be right back, Lillian."

Callie puts out knives and forks and the old linen napkins from the trunk. She can't imagine Lillian and Lewis letting her choose which room she sleeps in.

"Callie, stop dreaming and bring the butter in from the cream can."

When she gets back, Dorothy is sitting at the kitchen table, Lewis's brass ashtray and a box of Player's at her elbow. Smoke from her cigarette drifts out the open window and a few ashes have dribbled down her front.

"When did you take up smoking?" Lillian stirs gravy at the stove. "Mother wouldn't approve; it's unladylike."

Dorothy's laugh is hearty. "Who says I'm a lady?"

"Dot!"

"Now, Lillian, don't get your knickers in a twist. I'm teasing. I see no reason why I shouldn't enjoy cigarettes. Haven't you tried it?"

"Certainly not. Men don't like to see a woman smoke."

"Kjell doesn't mind, but it wouldn't matter if he did. I put up with his bad habits, so he can put up with mine."

Callie finally remembers to put the butter down.

Next afternoon the men go back to work on Kjell's land. Lillian says, "You come with me to Dot's and help put away her things. You can wash and dry the dishes."

Now she has to do somebody else's damn dishes. Still, she can see what kind of furniture and books the Rasmussens have and how the house feels now they're in it.

Dorothy is still wearing slacks and has a kerchief tied around her hair. "It's good of you to help; I feel like I'm drowning in a sea of boxes."

"Aren't your clothes unpacked yet?" Lillian asks.

"I did that this morning while Kjell was setting up the wood stove. Why?"

"You're wearing pants."

"I wear dresses ten months out of the year, teaching school, and I'm only too glad to get into a pair of pants the rest of the time."

Callie sees Lillian's lips purse. So does Dorothy. "Lillian, surely pants are more

practical on a farm."

"If you're working outside with machinery, yes, but I should hope you're not going to do that."

"Why? Driving a tractor looks as if it might be rather fun." Dorothy winks at Callie.

"That's a man's job." Lillian shakes her head. "It shouldn't be necessary for ladies."

"We'll see." Dorothy reaches for a screwdriver, an odd little smile on her face.

Callie helps unpack china, white with tiny sprays of pink roses. Dag emerges from his room to help her move the crate outside. She asks, "How come you didn't go with your father up to the field this afternoon?"

"I'm putting away my stuff. I'll go with him tomorrow, I guess. You want to come and see my room?"

She stands in the doorway of the cramped room until the bookcase draws her closer. It's smaller than hers and, instead of stories and school texts, he has books about hockey and basketball. A hockey stick leans in one corner.

"What's that?" She points to a large ball.

"Haven't you ever seen a basketball before?"

"No."

He stares at her, craning his head forward on his long neck. "You've never been to a basketball game?"

"No."

"Jesus."

"Do you know how to drive a tractor?" She moves to the doorway. Does he swear like that in front of his parents?

"No. Why would I?"

"Same reason I've never seen a basketball game."

When the dishes have been washed and put away, Lillian says, "Why don't you show Dag the farm? Take a couple of lard pails and see if you can find some wild strawberries. There might still be enough around to make a pie."

She takes him to the barn first. "Do you want to go up to the loft and see the kittens?"

"What for? I'm not interested in cats." He glances around at the six stalls and goes outside. "My Uncle Arn's barn is a lot bigger than this."

"We don't need a big barn." Maybe he doesn't know how much fun kittens can be. He's nice to look at, though. His thick dark hair reminds her of Rory Calhoun.

He peers in at the door of the chicken house but doesn't make any comment other than screwing up his face at the stink. When Skipper bounces in, startling the laying hens, she's the one who has to get him out. Up in the pasture, she introduces him to Rosie and her calf, Buck.

"You name all your animals?"

"Well, sure!" She wants to say they're part of the family, but he might think that's stupid. Maybe it was silly to name Buck since he'll be going to the butcher in town come spring, but everybody needs a name. Even Limpy, the chick, who comes running whenever she calls.

"Is this all you've got? One cow and one calf?"

"What's wrong with that?"

Dag's smile is scornful. "Not much of a farm with only two head of cattle. My Uncle Arn has three hundred head."

"Sounds like he has a ranch, not a farm."

They walk up the hill to the wheat field and she shows him the green wheat shoots sprouting up, then turns and points out Herron Creek meandering along the valley bottom. "We net suckers there in May."

"What are suckers?"

"My Dad says they're bottom feeders."

"Junk fish. We go after pike or pickerel."

Water glints through the willows that border the creek. She wishes she were down there, alone, listening to the gurgle of the slow-moving stream.

Dag doesn't like anything she's shown him.

They walk along the fence to the southeast corner of the pasture, where Lewis will be buried someday, and angle down to the lake trail. "There's a good strawberry patch about a quarter of a mile down the valley."

When they get there, he says, "I don't see any strawberries."

She kneels and shows him tiny red berries drooping under the broad triple leaves of the plant.

"You mean we have to pick those? It'll take forever."

"They taste wonderful. It's worth it." She pops one into her mouth and shuts her eyes as the intense, sweet freshness explodes on her taste buds.

He eats one. "Yeah, they are good."

Good? Is that all he can say?

He squats and for ten minutes the only sound is tiny strawberries pinging into the pails. "What do you do for fun around here?"

"Jake and I go tobogganing in winter." She lies on the toboggan and Jake races along beside her, grabbing her arm in his mouth and trying to pull her off.

"You and the stupid dog? Aren't there any kids to play with?"

"No."

Dag picks in silence for a minute. "Mom says there's a dormitory in town for country kids. Why don't you go there for school?"

"My folks won't let me."

"Well, I'm going. No way I'm getting stuck out here all year with nothing to do."

"There's lots to do."

"I don't mean work. In Medicine Hat, I played hockey in winter and basketball all year. That's what I like doing." He pops a strawberry into his mouth. "I'm going to be a professional basketball player."

"You can't play sports in the summer. You have to help your Dad clear land."

"Who says? He won't make me do it if I don't want to."

She jumps to her feet and moves to another section of the patch, face hot. It doesn't matter how much she hates housework, Lillian still makes her do it.

But there has to be something she likes that appeals to him, too. "Do you like reading?"

"Nah. That's for sissies."

Hell and damnation, who does he think he is?

He points at the creek. "Do you skate on that?"

"No, it would take too long to clear the snow off." She's not going to admit that she doesn't have any skates. "Ever been horseback riding?"

"I don't like horses much. When I'm sixteen, I'm gonna get a car."

A car! She's never thought of having a car. A truck would be all right, though. "When I'm running the farm, I'll have a pickup truck."

He hoots with laughter. "Boy, you really are dumb. Women don't run farms."

"Who are you calling dumb?" She gets to her feet. "You don't know anything about farming."

He stands up, too. "Nobody with any sense wants to live in the sticks. Just hicks and dumbheads."

"Are you calling your Mom and Dad dumbheads?"

"The old man got this stupid idea a couple years ago. He'll get over it." Dag's olive skin is tinged an ugly red. "We'll be back living in town inside a year, you'll see."

"Suits me." She turns away. Snotty, spoiled brat!

Without warning his hand is on her back. Her bra snaps against her flesh like a hundred mosquito bites. Fire leaps up in her chest and she swings around to face him.

He snickers.

The fire flares higher. "I'll fix your wagon!" She plows a fist hard into his gut and, when he doubles up, hits him on the chin. The old one-two, just like Lewis taught her. Dag tumbles backward into the strawberry patch, a surprised look on his face. She stands over him, knuckles hurting, but fists clenched. "You ever touch me again, I'll beat the shit out of you!"

He gets up, his hand pressed against his gut. "I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole. You stink." He walks toward the buildings. Thirty feet away, he turns and yells, "Dumb hick!" before walking on.

Dag's lard pail is lying on its side, half the berries spilled. She tries to pick them out of the grass, gives up and heads toward the house, knees wobbly. If Lillian finds out she slugged Dag, there'll be hell to pay.

Another ten steps and it hits her what she's done.

She lashed out at Dag the same way Lillian used to lash out at her. She swipes her arm across her face. She doesn't want to be like Lillian, but she'll never be sorry about Dag; it felt so good to hit him.

Later that night, over cocoa and ginger snaps, Lillian asks Lewis, "How's Kjell doing with the land up there?"

"All right, I guess. He's a pretty good worker if you tell him what to do."

Kjell's never farmed, so somebody has to teach him.

Lewis flicks a match and relights his pipe. "He's careless with tools. Leaves them lying around on the ground where they're likely to get run over."

"If he has to keep putting out money for new ones, I'm sure he'll be more careful."

"Well, it's his money." Lewis reaches for another ginger snap. "That dog of his is useless. It won't stay out of the way of the tractor."

Jake's smart and good company, though he doesn't do much except chase hawks away from the chickens. Why does everybody and everything have to have a use? Cloud fire isn't useful, and you can't eat stories and poems, but life would be awful without them.

Dag's the one who's useless. She'd hoped he would be a friend but even if he were the spitting image of Rory Calhoun, she'd never want to see him again.

Chapter Fifteen

Sitting next to the open window, as close as she can be to the poplars and sweetpeas outside, Callie squirms on the hard pew. Her hands are locked in white gloves, her feet in black oxfords. Yet her legs and arms feel bare and exposed in the short-sleeved white dress. It's not fair that she can't have white patent leather shoes with a strap across the instep, like those Agnes, Lorna, and Joy are wearing. Black oxfords look stupid with white ankle socks.

Her scalp itches under the bobby pins fastening the white net veil to her hair but she daren't scratch. If the veil comes off, Lillian will kill her. At least the thing falls over the back of her head, not over her face.

The whole family, except for Lewis, is in the row behind her, with Cathleen and Bert Harris and their two boys. The tiny church is so full that people are standing at the back. It feels like the whole world is watching.

It's hard to tell if Kjell is looking at her or not. When his left eye focuses on her, what does the other one see? Just a piece of her or a whole different scene? Maybe it sees a different world.

She's hardly seen Dag since their fight in the strawberry patch; he's been working with Kjell. If she makes a mistake, she'll be able to feel his smirk right through the back of her head. Nobody's said a word to her about knocking him down so he can't have told his parents about it. He wouldn't want to admit a girl could do that to him. But what if he's planning some kind of revenge?

The front of the church is filled with vases of sweet peas, peonies and sweet william, the scent rising in the heat. The flowers aren't there because of confirmation, though. This is the bishop's annual visit and from the way Cathleen and Lillian were talking this morning, the bishop's visit would be a big deal even if he weren't doing the confirmation service.

The organ wheezes to life and Father Penrose stands beside a chair with ornate carving on the high back and arms. While he leads the congregation in a hymn, she mentally recites the responses in the catechism. There's no way she's going to fail this test and have to do it over.

The bishop, in another fancy chair next to Father Penrose's, is wearing a tall, pure white, peaked hat, like a dunce's cap. Who washes and irons it for him? It's bound to fall off and get dirty once in a while. Men don't have enough hair to use bobby pins.

His shoes are ordinary black oxfords but the rest of him is covered in layers of cloth. The bottom layer is a dark red gown, most of it covered with a white one that has long sleeves ending in flounces at the wrist. Sort of like Lillian's winter nighties. On top of that is a cape of white shimmery material with embroidery down the front on both sides. The embroidery is done in brilliant, glowing colors like those Rita uses to decorate tablecloths.

Over the cape, a red embroidered scarf hangs down past his knees and he holds a tall shepherd's crook. The crook is easy to figure out; priests are supposed to be shepherds of the people. All these clothes must have some kind of religious meaning because no sensible person would wear so much on a hot July day.

Does the bishop enjoy getting dressed up? Maybe it makes him feel important to wear

a costume. That's what happens with Father Penrose. He's easy to be around when he's wearing a shirt and jeans, even with the white collar, but when he puts on the long black robes, he gets all dignified and pompous. She's been trying to catch his eye and smile, but he won't look at her.

She rubs at one of the bobby pins in her hair. Maybe this veil has some religious meaning, too. It isn't good for anything else, not even mosquito netting.

Father Penrose asks everyone to rise, and says, "Reverend Father in God, I present unto you these persons to receive the Laying on of Hands."

She stands, mouth dry, hands and knees trembling, while the priest reads from the Bible. What if she can't speak when she's supposed to?

The bishop says in a singsong voice, "Do you here, in the presence of God, and of this congregation, renew the solemn promise and vow that you made, or that was made in your name, at your baptism; ratifying and confirming the same; and acknowledging yourselves bound to believe and to do all those things which you then undertook, or your sponsors then undertook for you?"

No, no, no!

But lying is the only way to have peace.

She responds with a clear, firm, "I do," startled by the loudness of her voice. She shrinks into herself. Everyone in the quiet church has heard those awful words.

The other responses come out of her mouth as if someone else is saying them, then the bishop's prayer streams over her, a jumble of meaningless words. She kneels and bows her head when the others do. The shock of the bishop's heavy hand on her head brings her back to herself.

"Defend, O Lord, this Thy child with Thy heavenly grace; that she may continue Thine forever; and daily increase in Thy holy spirit more and more, until she come unto Thy everlasting kingdom. Amen."

But she belongs to herself, not to God.

After the bishop has said the same thing to Lorna, Joy, and Agnes, he leads the congregation in the Lord's Prayer. The hard floor hurts her bare knees and she's a bit dizzy. Is it a judgment against her because she doesn't believe?

Those two priests, so solemn in their flowing robes, must believe in God and the people behind her must believe, otherwise they wouldn't be here. It's possible she's wrong about there being no God. She tries to imagine Him smiling down on her, but all she can see is a robin singing in the poplar outside the window.

Two more prayers and everyone sits back. The ordeal will be over soon. She rubs her knees and turns her mind to bacon and eggs and toast. Lillian cooked a big breakfast for Lewis, but she and Callie didn't eat because of taking communion. The memory of hot sizzling bacon and fresh coffee makes her mouth water.

No wonder she's dizzy. It's not a judgment; she's starving to death.

She shuts her ears to the bishop's sermon. She's said what everybody wanted her to say, and it's done with; she doesn't have to make sense out of sermons now.

She sneaks a look over her shoulder and tries to guess how many people are in church. Fifty? Just because they're here doesn't have to mean they believe in God. Some must worry about what other people think, like Lillian, and come to services just for show. Lillian says she believes, but does she really? Some might come because they like the hymns and sermons. Even if most of them do believe, that doesn't prove she's wrong.

Anyway, how important can religion be? *Flowering Earth* says plants have been on earth for a billion years, but Jesus was born less than 2,000 years ago.

The robin flies away, leaving the poplar tree to a dozen gossiping sparrows sitting like fat gray plums on the branches. Sunlight pours through the window, inching across the floor toward her feet; the heat soaks into her bones. Fat bumblebees, humming songs of honey, lurch from blossom to blossom in the sweet peas swaying above the window ledge. She leaves her body behind on the hard seat and floats out to join the sparrows. The bishop's voice fades.

Joy's elbow jars her ribs. It's time for communion, the last small hurdle before she's free. Father Penrose stands beside a table covered in white linen.

"He that soweth little shall reap little; and he that soweth plenteously shall reap plenteously. Let every man do as he is disposed in his heart, not grudging, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver." Bert Harris and another man are taking the collection.

The more grain you plant, the more grows, that's true. But all these people putting money in the collection plate, what will they get?

More prayers and the priest invites people to come up for communion. The general confession takes forever and the bit about sinning by 'thought, word and deed' doesn't seem realistic. If thoughts can be sinful, people who believe in God must have to confess every day. It's impossible to stop thoughts coming into your head.

After communion and the blessing everyone moves outside and the solemn, doomful voice of the priest is replaced by every-day chattering voices. It's bliss to breathe the fresh, sun-washed air, to clear her nostrils of the musty, perfumed odors in the church.

She's behind Lillian and Cathleen, who are talking about Princess Elizabeth marrying Philip Mountbatten next November. Pushing past them, she sees the Negro's dark, crinkly hair ahead. She's going to talk to him, prove to herself that he's like other people except for the color of his skin. Too bad if Lillian doesn't like it.

He pauses on the steps to shake hands with Father Penrose. His navy suit is crisp and pressed, his white shirt so bright it hurts her eyes. When he starts down the sidewalk, she smiles at him, then runs to the gate so she can speak to him away from the crowd.

He tries to walk past her, but she holds out her hand. "I'm Callie McKenzie."

"Hello, Callie. My name's Tanner. Abraham Tanner."

"I'm pleased to meet you." His large hand is warm and firm around hers, his eyes friendly. She feels tall and competent and eager to hear what he has to say.

"I'm glad you saw fit to come to the Lord, Callie. He will keep you safe from harm."

She hadn't expected a remark like that. He's an outsider, like she is; doesn't he know they have a lot in common? Before she can think of anything to say, Lillian shouts from the church steps.

"Callie, you get back here this minute!"

Abraham withdraws his hand and winks. "You take care now." He strides away down the gravel road toward town. Her hand falls to her side and her body shrinks.

Lillian clutches her shoulder and hisses, "Those people are animals. Don't you dare speak to any of them!"

"Animals are a lot nicer than some people!"

Lillian's anger spreads into a red aura around her head. "I'll deal with you when we get home."

Her first punishment is to wash the white dress by hand and roll it in a towel. While the flatiron heats on the stove, she smooths a flannelette sheet over a folded blanket on the kitchen table to serve as an ironing board. She presses the dress, breathing in the smell of steaming hot cotton. The tucks and gathers take a long time. Whoever presses Abraham's shirts must have a proper ironing board because the one he'd worn to church was smooth as glass.

"You've done a poor job on the sleeves," Lillian says. "But it'll do." She takes it away to wrap in tissue paper and put in the trunk. "Now you can peel potatoes."

After supper, Callie is pouring dirty dish water into the slop bucket when Dorothy taps at the back door and walks in, a box of Players and a silver lighter in her hand.

"Come on, relax," she says to Lillian. "I've been here almost two weeks and we still haven't had a good chin wag."

"I'll put on a pot of tea," Lillian says. "Callie, do your outside chores. Then go scrub the outhouse."

Callie ladles hot water into a bucket. This is more punishment; Lillian did the outhouse only two weeks ago. After the animals are fed, she visits the kittens. They're tame now and she can hold them or pull a straw for them to chase. They're soft and cuddly, but whirlwinds of little claws when they want to play.

Not until she's scrubbing the outhouse floor does she wonder what Lillian and Dorothy are saying. Five minutes later, she's sitting on the grass under the open kitchen window. Lewis is hammering at something in the shop, but she's behind the doghouse so he can't see her either.

In the kitchen, tea gurgles into cups. "I don't know what I'm going to do with Callie," Lillian says. "She's far too independent for her own good. That business of running away just takes the cake."

"What's wrong with being independent? She has to learn to look after herself."

"No, she doesn't. When she marries, her husband will look after her. She has to learn to be a good wife. No man wants a woman too selfish to make a proper home for him."

"Supposing she doesn't marry?" Cigarette smoke drifts out the window and Callie inhales it. Someday she's going to try smoking, no matter what Lillian says.

"Nonsense! It's her duty to be a wife and mother." Lillian sighs. "The trouble is she's far more interested in books and what the men do than in cooking and cleaning."

"She'll pick it up when she has to," Dorothy says. "I didn't know much about cooking when I married Kjell."

"Didn't Mother teach you how, after I came to Canada?"

"I was only twelve when you left and I wasn't interested, any more than Callie is."

"I'm surprised she didn't insist." There is an odd sort of stiffness in Lillian's voice.

"Life was different after the war. Freer. Conventions were breaking down. Mother was upset by it, but she didn't box me in the way she did you."

"I always trusted Mother to know what was best. I'm sure it didn't do you any good to have more freedom."

"Oh, I don't know," Dorothy says. "There's a lot of satisfaction in making up your own mind about things."

"I'll brew more tea." The dipper clinks against the pail as Lillian fills the kettle. "Mother told me I should stay in England, but I thought it was a great adventure, marrying a Canadian and going to a new country. I often wish I'd listened to her."

"Because of Lewis's past history?"

Callie holds her breath, hoping Lillian will reveal the secret of Lewis's past.

"If I'd known that, I wouldn't have married him." Lillian's voice is sharp. "No, it's just that this raw, uncivilized country is no place to raise a family."

"You seemed happy enough with it when Lewis was working on the railroad. And I haven't had any problem with Dag."

Callie almost laughs out loud. Dorothy should hear the way he talks when she's not around. But Dag's an idiot; he doesn't know when he's well off.

"Yes, but we lived in a town then. Callie spends too much time on her own out here."

Callie pulls a grass shoot from its sheath and chews the sweet, tender end. Too bad Lillian didn't go on talking about Lewis's secret. The tea pot lid clinks home and Lillian's chair creaks as she sits down again.

Dorothy lights another cigarette. "I don't suppose you have any cookies hidden away, do you?"

"Oh, I am sorry!" Lillian's chair scrapes back and there's a rattle as she opens the cookie tin.

A brief silence. "These ginger snaps are very good, Lillian. Would you give me your recipe?"

Rats! They're going to talk about recipes. Callie crawls on her hands and knees to the corner of the house and stands up. Dorothy is nice; it's a relief to know not all women are like Lillian and Cathleen Harris.

When she strolls in the back door, Lillian says, "I might have known you'd turn up if there were cookies on the table. Take a couple and get on with your studying."

Callie smiles at Dorothy, grabs some cookies and heads for her room. Reading is far better than listening to dull stuff about cooking. Or speculating on Lewis's secrets when there's no hope of getting an answer.

She'll find out what *Wild Flowers* says about locoweed. Lewis and Bert had talked about the plant after church, saying that cattle like it even though it's poisonous.

Mr. Stack doesn't have a single word to say about locoweed. All she can do now is watch for plants with spikes of purple flowers and see if Lewis can identify them. *Wild Flowers* is a good book, but she definitely needs a better one. *Flowering Earth* says there are a hundred thousand species of flowering plants on earth, so the book she needs will be enormous.

She puts on pajamas, props herself up in bed and begins to write, ready to chuck the notebook and pencil under the bed the moment Lillian moves. The Amazon fairies' new adventure is to put a spell on locoweed, making it taste bitter and thus saving a large herd of cattle.

After Dorothy leaves, Lillian makes tea for Lewis and herself. "I suppose you'll want Callie to help you clear land now that Dag is leaving."

Callie's eyelids pop open. Dag is leaving?

"I could do with her help."

"Well, if it has to be, it has to be. Don't forget I need her on washdays. On Saturday, too, to get the house cleaned up for Sunday."

Callie hugs her pillow. She can stand two days a week of Lillian yelling and fussing.

"Suits me to have her," Lewis says. "She's a better worker than Dag."

"Surely not! He's bound to be stronger than she is."

Too bad they didn't see him lying on the ground after she'd knocked him down.

"He's not as willing."

"I don't know what Kjell and Dot are thinking of, letting him go back to Medicine Hat for the rest of the summer. If you ask me, they're spoiling him rotten."

"If he doesn't want to farm, they can't force him."

"I know, but spending all that money on his train fare, just so he can play basketball. It's ridiculous."

Lewis's boots thud to the floor and his pipe clinks in the brass ashtray. "I'm going out to check the weather."

Now she doesn't have to worry about Dag sneaking up on her, doesn't have to worry about losing her temper and hitting him again.

She pulls Luke Short's *Savage Range* from under her pillow, the flashlight from under the bed and becomes Jim Wade, steely-eyed hero with a strong sense of honor and so brave he never backs down from a fight.

Chapter Sixteen

At noon, Lillian makes sandwiches with fresh bread, crisp, peppery radishes, and homemade butter. Callie decides the taste is almost worth her wrestling with the aluminum churn yesterday. But not quite. Not when the weather is so good and the valley calls to her. The second irksome job she'd got stuck with was hanging all the hooked and braided rugs on the clothesline and beating dust out of them with a stick. Most of the dust seemed to get up her nose.

So far, today's just as bad. Lillian says Sunday is a day of rest, but she only applies the rule to other people when she wants to, and never to herself. She found plans for a garden bench in the *Prairie Farmer* and Callie ended up spending all morning sawing boards and hammering nails.

Lewis finishes his tea. "Want to work the forge for me? I have to sharpen the plow share."

The shop is hot and stuffy but the coal in the forge glows in different patterns of red and orange as she turns the handle, forcing air to it. Sort of like making her own cloud fire. While Lewis hammers the glowing edge of the plow share on the anvil, she goes out to scan the valley.

Followed by Kjell and Dorothy, Skipper comes bouncing up the slope, his exuberant tail wagging his whole body. She rubs the dog while he squirms in delight.

Kjell pulls a roll-your-own from his shirt pocket and lights it. "Thought we'd take a hike up the hill and see how your wheat's doing. You want to come, Callie?"

"I can't. I'm helping Dad in the shop."

Dorothy smiles. "Woman's work is never done. Well, if you get finished early enough, you can have a game of crib with Kjell this afternoon."

"This time I'm going to skunk you." Kjell dusts his hands as if he's already done it.

"That'll be the day!" They've been playing crib two or three times a week and he hasn't skunked her yet.

"I think you've met your match, Kjell," Dorothy says.

They stroll away, hand in hand, and Lewis shakes his head. "He'll never make a decent farmer, slacking off like that. The world would go to hell in a handbasket if he was running it."

Lewis puts the plough share back in the coals and she turns the forge handle, her mind drifting to Abraham Tanner. Why does Lillian call him an animal? He seems like everybody else except for skin color. But Lillian doesn't like Indians either and their skin is dark. Is there something about skin color nobody's told her?

Lewis finishes the plow share and plunges it into a pail of cold water, where it hisses and sends up a cloud of steam. He says, "I'll have to do something about those kittens, you know."

"Oh, not yet! Please."

"Has to be done sooner or later."

She's heard all the arguments before. Cats can have three litters a year and then the litters have litters, on and on until there are cats everywhere. Most would starve or freeze or die of distemper.

"I know, but there's one that's not doing very well. I take food to Martha so she'll have

lots of milk for it."

"Survival of the fittest is a law of nature. Even if the kitten grows up, it might not be able to look after itself. Kinder to dispose of it now than let it suffer."

There was a lot about survival of the fittest in *Call of the Wild*. Buck showed his fitness by being like a wolf and bossing the other dogs. If that's true of people, she's going to make sure she grows up to be a wolf. "Couldn't we take them to the vet and get them fixed?"

"No."

She's heard that answer before, too. The vet lives miles away, but even if he was next door, they don't have the money to pay him. "Can't we let Martha keep them for a while?" She crosses her fingers behind her back.

"The longer we leave it, the harder it'll be."

"I don't care. They're having such a good time."

"All right. Until the end of November. Not one day later, though, or I'll have to get rid of more kittens." Lewis carries the plow share outside. "And don't get too attached to them. It's bad enough having to kill them without you crying over it."

"Okay, I won't." She'll want to, but wolves don't cry. She finds Lillian in the shed shelling peas and says, "I'm going to play crib with Kjell." There's not enough time now to walk down to the lake.

"Call him 'Uncle' Kjell. Show some respect for your betters. And don't stay over there all afternoon, getting in your aunt's way."

The main room in Kjell's house is front room and kitchen combined. The black and chrome stove and peach-colored cupboards are at one end, a heavy brown leather couch and a couple of matching chairs at the other. A chrome table with a gray Formica top sits under the window facing the road, which means she can glance at the valley now and then while they're playing cards.

Kjell gets up from his easy chair. "Come to get skunked, have you?" He takes a deck of cards and the crib board from the windowsill and sits at the table.

"You go ahead and beat the pants off him," Dorothy says. "He's been sassy all day."

"Now you're being sassy," Kjell says. "Careful, woman, or I'll take you in the bedroom and calm you down."

"I'll keep that thought in mind for later."

"I bet your sister thinks about it a lot, too. The way she acts, I figure she can't be getting enough."

Grownups are so rude. Why can't they talk so she can understand what they're saying?

"Kjell." There's a warning note in Dorothy's voice.

"Sorry," he says. "Cut for deal, Callie."

Dorothy reads in her armchair while Callie whips Kjell two out of three games, twice running.

"Dot, she's making mincemeat out of me."

"Poor baby. You'll have to try harder." Dorothy has a blob of strawberry jam on her blouse. Lillian would never wear clothes with stains; dirt is not allowed anywhere in her house. Dorothy's house looks lived in and so do Dorothy's clothes. There can't be anything wrong with that.

"I'm going to get serious now," Kjell says. "You watch out, Callie. I'm dynamite once I start."

"Oh, sure! You couldn't peg out if you only had two holes to go."

"Is that right, Miss Smarty Pants? You just watch me."

His luck turns and he starts getting double runs and fifteens in every hand. She plays the most cunning game she can but loses the next three.

"Almost skunked you the last time." Kjell beams.

"That was pure luck. I didn't get any cards."

"That's what losers always say." He glances at the clock on the windowsill. His wandering eye seems to be looking at her.

Will he get angry if she asks about it? But it's impossible to imagine him being anything but cheerful. "Do you see anything with your right eye?"

"Ha ha! I see when you're cheating!"

"Don't tease her, Kjell." Dorothy puts her magazine down. "He's blind in that eye."

"Isn't it hard to do things?"

"I'm used to it. Been that way all my life."

"He was born cross-eyed," Dorothy says. "His parents thought he'd grow out of it, but the right eye just became weaker and weaker until it was completely useless."

So, he doesn't see some strange world with that eye. But he must see the world differently than other people. Even with two eyes, she sees it differently than Lillian. But is what she sees the truth?

He reaches out and gently tugs at one of her braids. "Want another beating?"

"Sure." She doesn't mind as long as she can sit in this easy-going house and be treated like a real person.

"Make it quick," Dorothy says, putting an arm around each of them and squeezing. She kisses the top of Kjell's head where his sandy hair is thinning. "I've got to get supper going here in a minute."

While Dorothy works at the counter, Callie trounces Kjell in the last game.

He puts the cards and the crib board away. "Too bad Dot and I never had any kids together. I wish I had a daughter like you. You're pretty bright."

She's flustered but can't help smiling. She'd like to hug him the way Dorothy did, but she doesn't dare. Last time she tried to hug Lewis, years ago, he'd said, "You're too big for that stuff now."

Dorothy says, "But we can pretend you're our daughter when you're over here visiting."

Kjell shoves his chair back. "Come and sit on my knee, daughter."

"I'm too big; I'd break your legs." It's only little kids who sit on people's knees.

"I'm pretty tough." He pats his knee. "Come on, put her there."

If she does, maybe he'll give her a hug, like Dorothy did. She eases down on his knees and puts her hand on his shoulder to steady herself. It feels really strange.

"That's the ticket!" He puts both arms around her waist and bounces her once. His arms feel warm and strong, and she wants to put her head on his chest and snuggle up. But grownups don't snuggle.

"Guess you are a little big for knee-sitting," Dorothy says. "I keep forgetting you're taller than I am."

As much as she likes Kjell's arms around her, there's a twist of tension inside. He might say or do something else odd, and she won't know how to act. "I'd better go home. Mom will want help with supper."

Kjell lets her go, giving her a smack on the rear as she stands up. She half turns, ready to roughhouse with him the way she does with Russell, but relaxes her hand before it becomes a fist. Somehow, this doesn't seem like quite the same thing.

She's deep into *Flowering Earth* again when Lewis says to Lillian, "How about some tea? Must be going on for nine-thirty. Kjell wants to get an early start tomorrow."

"Are you taking Callie with you?"

"No, she can stay here and help you."

She'd bet Dorothy and Kjell don't talk about Dag like he's not there.

Later she huddles under her blanket with the diary and the flashlight.

I almost skunked Kjell today. He said he wished I was his daughter and asked me to sit on his lap.

A faint whine penetrates her concentration. She turns the flashlight off and listens, holding her breath. Is it a mosquito? The whining repeats, but in a different key.

It's the kettle. On the stove, full of hot water, so Lewis can have some with baking soda if he gets indigestion. Callie puts her diary under the bed and closes her eyes.

She's half asleep when the kettle starts singing again. It hums a word, stops, hums a whole line. Silence for a minute or two. Then it gives a little yelp, like a dog stung by a wasp. She's drifting off again when it decides to sing an entire verse. There's no rhythm to it and the sounds go in unexpected directions. She lies tense and apprehensive, waiting to see what it will do next. Funny, the kettle singing has never bothered her before.

She could douse the fire with a dipper of water, but one of them is sure to hear her putting the stove lid back on. Maybe it's dying down now because the kettle's been quiet for at least five minutes.

Mnnnnnnnn!

She throws off the covers, tiptoes out to the kitchen and moves the kettle to the cold side of the stove. Back into bed, problem solved.

Lillian pokes her head in past the curtain. "What did you move the kettle for?"

"All that racket was keeping me awake."

"Well, don't do it again."

"How am I going to get to sleep?"

"Don't be such a little whiner. Make up your mind to ignore it; then it won't bother you."

But it does bother her. She doesn't know when it's going to make a noise or what the noise will sound like. It disturbs the silence even when it's not singing.

The bed in the other room creaks as Lillian gets back in. Callie buries her head under the covers. Hell and damnation, doesn't that kettle bother anybody else?

Their bed creaks again. Are they doing it? The thing that Silver and the stallion did? She tries to imagine it, Lillian kneeling on the bed on all fours, Lewis behind her.

Do humans make babies that way? And why do they do it if they don't want more babies?

Chapter Seventeen

Callie eases the screen door shut behind her and squints in the hot brightness of early afternoon. Lillian has kept her busy every minute of the four days since she got roped into helping with the garden seat. The worst job had been scrubbing the floors, though the damp boards smelled fresh afterwards. Now, at last, she has a chance to be on her own for a few hours.

The distant rumble of the McCormick Deering rises above the steady chirring of grasshoppers in the dry grass. She walks around the corner of the house. A haze of dust marks Lewis's progress down the summer fallow on the other side of the creek. From this distance he looks like a toy man on a toy tractor, a froth-tailed toy dog scouting ahead. She could go ride with him, but the old tractor's steel wheels jar her bones. She wonders how many good wheat crops it will take before Lewis can have a new tractor like Kjell's, with rubber tires and a padded seat.

In the house a door slams. Lillian's been down cellar, no doubt getting something she'll want scrubbed, peeled, and sliced. Callie runs, braids bouncing on her back, through the gate, across the road, and down the slope past the new vegetable garden Kjell plowed for Dorothy. She flops under a clump of willows in the tall, cool grass on the creek bank, her feet almost touching the shallow water.

The creek slides slow and lazy along its narrow bed. But in the spring, snow melt roars down the valley, tearing out willow roots and leaving mud and branches strewn on the banks. Last year they had to tie the log bridge Lewis built to stakes so it wouldn't drift away. After the water went down, he spent two days fixing the bridge so it would bear the weight of the truck and tractor again.

Water chatters around a willow root, whispers past her feet. There are dozens of hiding places in the tangled willows where she can sit and look at leaves or make up stories. But this is a sky dream day and the best place for that is across the bridge, on an old straw stack by the field. She's hollowed out a nest in the top of the straw stack where she can hide and watch what goes on in the valley. She'll go there and bask under the sun.

She rolls up her pant legs, splashes through the ankle-deep water and stops to look back at the farmyard. No one in sight. She flies up the bank, running shoes squelching, and scrambles to the top of the straw stack.

Home safe! She nestles into the hollow, skin grazed by the brittle, musty straw, and squints at the sun. It makes sparkling rainbows in her eyelashes.

The sky seems to go on forever, a deep ocean of transparent blue air. In the southwest, above the jack pine ridge, whipped cream cumulus clouds drift, shifting, changing shape. The purr of the tractor fades to the far side of the field and blends with the drowsy chorus of grasshoppers. In the shimmering heat, her bones melt away and she drifts high into the blue depths.

She steps aboard the brilliant, billowing clouds, races up and down cushioned white hills, tumbles on cloud pillows. A castle rises before her and she floats through rooms and corridors, shimmering in radiant white, to a high rampart. From there she looks down on the green and golden earth far below, gazes at the shadow of moving clouds ribbon across the distant jade of the jack pine ridge.

The castle becomes an enormous white dragon, and she rides his shoulders as he

glides down toward the horizon. But she wants to go deeper into the sea of sky, not back to earth, so she lets go and drifts upward again.

The blue carries her like a river current. Soon she'll pass the clouds, the sun, even reach the moon as it rises. Will the sky still be blue there? Floating free above the earth, the sky must always be clear, bright, blue.

A flight of swallows eddies in the breeze; a hawk coasts below her. Ahead, the crescent moon gleams silver in a halo of muted white light. Her fingers stretch toward it, yearning to penetrate the halo, to touch the silver of the moon itself.

A low, insistent vibration shivers the halo to shreds and she covers her ears as the thrumming swells to a roar. Her bones have weight again, the straw teases her skin. Rising to her knees, she sees the tractor a hundred feet away, heading toward the bridge. Half a mile away, Kjell's pickup bounces down the trail.

It can't be that late! But the sun has crept far westward, and the shadows are lengthening. Taking a small length of the faded straw for her treasure box, she slides down the straw stack and trudges toward the house, half of her still floating in the clouds, the other half knowing Lillian will want help with supper.

On the way she catches a glimpse of white in the long grass. Pearly everlasting. Mr. Stack calls it silver-leaf and moonshine, too; much nicer names. The tightly packed heads, rough under her fingers, are made of up tiny white globes of petals with yellow centers, like miniature daisies. She picks five. They never wilt; she can keep them in a jar all year.

When she walks through the kitchen, Lillian scowls. "More weeds? If those leaves drop, you'll have to do the sweeping. Hurry up; I need spuds peeled for supper."

She peels potatoes while fire crackles in the wood stove and the aroma of roasting beef fills the kitchen. "The sky is so blue today. It must be blue all the way to outer space. And the clouds are pure white."

Lillian pokes a piece of wood into the stove and bangs the lid back into place. "Don't your science courses teach you anything? The sky isn't blue; it only looks that way because of dust particles in the atmosphere. And clouds are just rain that hasn't fallen yet. If you were inside one, it would be gray and damp and cold."

She knows all that. Why does Lillian like spoiling things? Callie puts down the paring knife, her dreamy mood shattered, and goes out to blink up at the sky.

The hawk is cruising, dark and graceful against white clouds and blue sky. Late afternoon sun bathes the ripening waves of wheat with gold. The ground is solid beneath her feet and the valley curves away to the northwest as it always has.

If the sky looks blue, it is blue; there's no reason to think of it being full of dust. If Lillian sees clouds as big balls of gray rain, that's her problem. Sky dreams are true, too.

Saturday morning Callie helps Lewis load the truck with firewood. In Millburn, behind the postmistress's house, they unload it. Mrs. Weyburn says, "I do appreciate your help. Will you have a cup of coffee and a piece of pie?"

"Sounds good," Lewis says, "but we don't have time." The last heavy chunk of green poplar hits the pile and Lewis takes the truck over to George's to pick up groceries.

Callie goes around the front to the post office. Mrs. Weyburn, looking less witchlike

now that she has a set of false teeth, hands her a great bundle of McKenzie and Rasmussen mail. "Tell your Dad thanks again for the wood."

Callie climbs into the truck and examines the mail. A letter from Peter for Lillian and six brown envelopes from Victoria for her. It's annoying that she has to wait until she gets home to see her marks.

The sky clouds over and as they leave Millburn, rain thunders on the cab roof and bounces off the hood. Lewis curses the struggling windshield wipers. "We need the moisture, but I hope to hell it doesn't turn to hail."

The rain soaks into dry ground and is sucked up by the roots of wheat, grass, and trees. She crosses her fingers for more hot sunny days and more rain, just the right amount, so the Thatcher wheat kernels will grow big and fat. If they get a bumper crop of sixty bushels to the acre or better and the elevator grades it as No. One Northern, Lewis won't have to worry about money again this year.

At home, she races for the house, sheltering the mail under her shirt, and tosses it, rain-spattered, onto the kitchen table.

"You open your lessons," Lillian says. "I don't have time to go through all that lot."

That's a relief, since these must be the PE assignments she faked at the end of May. Suppose Mrs. Harmon could smell her lies coming off the paper and has given her D's?

She slides the first one out of the envelope, unfolding and smoothing it before she lets herself look at the top left-hand corner. B+ on the high jumps! That's better than she expected. There's a note in red ink from Mrs. Harmon.

Very good, Callie. You can do better. Keep practicing.

The other assignments have similar marks and comments. She fingers them, her relief turning sour. She hasn't earned those good marks. Maybe she should spend August practicing all the PE things she lied about so that by the time school starts again, she will deserve the marks.

It's interesting how well lies work, though; no more Lillian laughing at her clumsiness. No more Lillian on her back about believing in God.

Her stomach is still churning, even though Mrs. Harmon doesn't know she lied and never will. This year she'll do the PE assignments properly, even if it means going a mile or two south on the lake trail, where nobody can see her.

A rap at the screen door and a cheerful, "Anybody home?" precedes Dorothy's appearance in the kitchen. "I'm driving to Fort St. John to get school clothes for Dag. Do you want to come, Lillian?"

Lillian beams. "How long are you going to be?"

"We'll be home for supper." Dorothy plumps down at the table. "Lewis or Callie might like to come, too."

"Lewis won't go."

Callie thinks about having the house to herself for most of the day and says, "I don't want to go either."

Lillian looks down at her faded house dress. "Just give me a few minutes to get cleaned up."

"You're fine as you are." Dorothy has on a flowered blouse, slacks and running shoes.

"Oh, I couldn't go out looking like this." Her hand flutters to the top button of her dress. "Callie, can you get dinner for your father and yourself without making a mess of it?"

It's a wonder Lillian doesn't tell her how to breathe.

"There's cold meat from last night's roast," Lillian says, "and boiled potatoes you can fry. Put out some bread and butter and pickles and ginger snaps for dessert."

"Okay."

"Make some tea for Dot while I get changed. And here's Peter's letter." Lillian bustles into the bedroom.

Dorothy lights a cigarette and crosses one knee over the other. "I suppose she doesn't go to town often, so she wants to get dolled up."

Callie puts the letter in her pocket, fills the kettle and gets Dorothy the brass ashtray. She brings butter in from the cream can so that by noon it will soften enough to spread without tearing the bread apart.

"Aunt Dorothy, there's cigarette ash on your slacks."

Dorothy takes a half-hearted swipe at the ashes. "Why should I try to be perfect when life is so messy?"

Callie can't think of any answer to that one.

"You can play crib with Kjell this afternoon if you're in the mood for it." Dorothy butts her cigarette. "If this rain keeps up, he won't be able to work outside."

Why doesn't he help Lewis in the shop? But her father says he gets things done faster on his own. She suspects the real reason is that he doesn't like having to pay attention to another person. That's why he likes her to help; she never talks unless he starts a conversation.

As Lillian comes out of the bedroom in her good blue dress, smelling of face powder, and rubbing glycerin and rose water lotion into her hands, there is a demanding "cheep, cheep, cheep" from the back door.

"Limpy wants in." Callie opens the door for him. He's now a rambunctious teenager, his leg healed, and the yellow fluff of his baby days replaced by brownish red feathers.

He hops on Dorothy's foot, then her knee and looks around. With two jumps he's at the butter dish, pecking the unexpected treasure.

"Put that creature outside," Lillian says. "He's getting too big to be a pet. And give him the parts of the butter he had his beak in."

Not until the pickup is gone does she realize why Lillian was willing to give Limpy more butter. She's fattening him up. Lillian says the young rooster is going in the stew pot no matter how much Callie pleads. He's doomed, just like the kittens, and there's nothing she can do. A band tightens across her chest. If she had her own house, they could all live with her forever.

When Lewis comes in, the table is set and she's frying potatoes. They eat in silence, gazing out at the rain. It's so peaceful. Suppose Lillian died and they could live by themselves?

She jumps up to pour tea. Lewis smokes his pipe over two cups of it and walks back to the shop. She washes the dishes, feeling a little disappointed. He hadn't said a word about how good the potatoes were or noted that she could do dinner as well as Lillian.

She's never seen him cook or make tea. He must expect food to appear like magic. But she expects him to milk Rosie and plant grain and fix machinery no matter what. She imagines Lillian walking down to the barn to tell him what a good milker he is and smiles. Still, it's the first time she's fixed a whole meal by herself.

She takes her bra off. She can be free of that miserable thing until Lillian comes back.

Then she wanders through the house, listening to the silence.

In the attic, she lies on one of the cots. She could have a nap, and nobody would know. Or read whatever she likes. When Lillian inspected Aunt Etta's Christmas box of books, she'd said *Gone With The Wind* was filthy trash and took it away. A few weeks later Lillian and Lewis went to Millburn in the cutter, and it had taken no time at all to find the book in Lillian's trunk. She'd read all afternoon, letting the fire go out three times, then had to split more kindling to replenish the box so they wouldn't suspect.

Nothing in the book seemed 'filthy,' though the story was so exciting she wants to read it again, every word this time. Ever since, she's wanted someone to explain 'filthy trash' but who is there to ask?

She reads Peter's letter, which says he's coming home for two weeks holiday in August. She grins at the rafters. There is so much to tell him she doesn't see how she can wait. Maybe he'll bring his guitar, too, and sing some new songs for her.

She walks to the north window to look at Kjell's house. He can be fun, sort of like a father young enough to act like a brother. Except that she never knows what he might say or do next. Five minutes later, a sweater over her head, she dashes through the rain to Kjell's house.

"Wondered if you were going to keep me company," he says. He seems quiet and she wonders if he's mad at her. It's been a whole week since he asked her to play crib.

By the time she's beaten him two games out of three, he's back to his usual cheerful self. "I'm gonna whomp you good this time."

"Wanna bet?"

"Nah, wouldn't be fair to take all your money."

She could let him win but that's as much a lie as the kind you say out loud. As it happens, he wins anyway.

"Now we're even," she says. "Do you want to play another three to see who's champion?"

"I'd like it better if you came over here and sat on my lap like a good daughter." He smiles, patting his knee.

He's wearing a green wool plaid shirt like Lewis's and, as she leans closer, she gets a whiff of tobacco. The thought of having his arms around her is irresistible.

"Sit across both knees," he says. "You're too heavy to sit on just one."

She puts an arm around his neck and relaxes against the solid warmth of his body as he pulls her close.

"That's the way. Is that nice?"

She murmurs yes and snuggles against him.

After a moment he takes one hand away from her back and covers her breast with it. Startled, she stops breathing for a second, but his hand feels good.

"Nobody ever do that to you before?"

"No."

"It's nice for me, too."

His thumb makes slow circles on her nipple, through the thin cloth of her cotton shirt. The nipple becomes firm and she's too astounded by the way it feels to say a word. She presses into his hand, surprised that her body, eager for more and harder pressure, seems to have taken over her mind. She is barely aware of his sudden intake of breath.

He caresses her other breast, bringing the nipple to a tight nubbin. Her blood is

pulsing, frothing like ginger beer. It feels strange. Scary. She notices with one small part of her mind that he has sandy hairs on the backs of his fingers and wonders if they look red in sunlight.

Kjell's hands move to her waist and underneath her shirt to slide over her back. The thought of those warm hands moving on her bare breasts makes her lean toward him.

"Guess that's enough for now." His tone is abrupt. He takes her by the waist and stands her on her feet.

For some reason his face is red, and his breathing sounds rough. He pulls his chair up closer to the table. "You feel like playing that championship game now?"

"Okay." She wants him to go on touching. Yet it's a relief to be sitting where he can't reach her.

He wins the cut and deals. "Don't tell Dorothy or anybody what we just did, all right? She wouldn't like it."

"I won't." She likes Dorothy too much to upset her. And telling Lillian is out of the question. Lillian thinks touching your own body is bad, so she'd probably say that somebody else touching it is terrible.

"That's good." Kjell picks up his hand and smiles at her over the cards. "Let's keep it our little secret."

It's hard to concentrate on the game but soon the heat in her body subsides and she manages to beat him, though only by two points. He puts the cards and crib board back on the windowsill.

"Guess you'd better go on home now. The rain's let up so I can get outside and do a few things."

She hadn't even noticed the sun was out again. She walks back to her own house, reliving the tingly feelings Kjell's hands had started in her body. Her crotch was hot, too, the way it gets when she touches herself Down There.

Lillian says it's dirty to touch yourself. Then why does it feel so good?

Was it a bad thing she and Kjell did? Maybe so, if Dorothy wouldn't like it. Secrets are fun but somehow this one isn't something she can treasure. Keeping a secret so Dorothy won't be upset seems almost like a lie. But how can it be a lie when she hasn't said anything?

Do fathers do to daughters what Kjell did? Lewis used to hold her on his lap, but he doesn't now. Is that because he doesn't want to or because it's not right? And Kjell is her uncle; he wouldn't do anything wrong. Would he?

She puts her bra back on, though it will be a couple of hours before Lillian gets home. The bra feels like a shield. But against what? The only thing she knows for sure is that the feeling Kjell gave her is too wonderful to tell anyone about. Well, a real person, anyway. She pulls out the diary and sits down to write.

Chapter Eighteen

Callie's been lying awake since four o'clock, watching the sky lighten to silvery gray. Today she's going with Kjell to the Fort St. John airport to meet Peter. She imagines sitting beside Kjell in the truck, his hands touching her, and a thrill makes her shiver.

Lillian calls her at five-thirty, and she dresses, lures Rosie and Buck in from the pasture and eats her porridge. Kjell honks for her at six and her knees are shaky as she climbs into the truck. Tense, she stares out the window, willing herself to look normal.

Kjell is silent as he maneuvers the pickup over the rutted road to the Alaska Highway. The firm fabric seat under her absorbs the jarring better than Lewis's truck. The sky turns pink behind the dark, spiky jack pines and the air is cool, fresh with the scent of pine and damp earth.

He hasn't asked her to play crib all week. Did she do something wrong last Saturday? She's never heard people talk about such things, not even in books. His shirt and pants smell of soap and sunshine under the smoky overlay of tobacco. She wants to slide over and sit close to his solid warmth, but he might not like it. When they come home with Peter, maybe she'll get to sit in the middle.

"Light my cigarette, will you, Callie?" He puts a roll-your-own in his mouth, and she lights it with a wooden match from the small box on the dashboard. Her fingers graze his as she pulls her hand away and blood rushes to her face. She waits for him to speak or touch her, but he doesn't. He looks straight ahead and steers the truck as if it's the most important job in the world.

Muskeg, spruce, and patches of tall fireweed slide by the window. She begins making a mental list of all the things she wants to tell Peter.

Inside the small terminal, she hurries to a window in time to see the silver Dakota roll along the runway toward her. When Peter strides across the tarmac, his black hair ruffled by the breeze, her stomach ties itself in knots.

He walks through the door, wraps his arms around her and gives her such a squeeze her ribs hurt.

"Hello, big brother." She's breathless and her voice squeaks instead of being dignified, the way she'd wanted.

His blue eyes survey her as though they can penetrate right to the back of her skull. "If you grow any more, you'll be taller than I am."

"I haven't grown at all the last five months." She'll never catch up to Peter; he's over six feet. She wishes he'd keep hugging her.

He turns to Kjell. "You must be Uncle Kjell." The two men shake hands and talk while Callie shifts from foot to foot, watching for the baggage cart.

On the drive home, sandwiched between the two men and their war reminiscences, she tries to revive the thrill of sitting close to Kjell, but it won't come back.

Lillian is waiting at the door, her face summery, her smile shining. Peter puts down his suitcase and guitar and leans over to kiss her cheek.

"You're too thin! You haven't been eating properly." Even her voice is gentle and smiling. "That Mrs. Sorsdahl can't be feeding you enough. Put your things away while I make coffee. You must be hungry after that long journey."

"Where's Dad?"

"Working on Kjell's land. He'll be home at noon."

Callie follows Peter up the narrow stairs and sits on a cot while he unpacks. "You don't look thin to me."

"I'm not. But you know what Mom's like."

When they go back downstairs, Lillian pours coffee and puts out a big plate of cookies and cake. "Have you decided what you're going to do when you finish university?"

"Research."

Peter's studying to be an astronomer. It must be exciting, learning about the stars. Maybe he'll discover a new star and have it named after him. A pleasant little chill runs up her spine. Someday she'll discover a new plant and have it named after her.

"Does that pay enough to support a wife and family?"

He dunks a ginger snap in his coffee, but Lillian doesn't seem to notice.

"Would depend on the job, I suppose. Anyway, I'm not thinking about getting married."

"Well, you should be! You're twenty-six and it's time you were settling down."

"If you want grandchildren, work on Russell and Rita. It'll be years before I get my Ph.D."

"Peter, getting married and having children is what life is all about."

"Not my life, Mom. There are plenty of other people doing their duty; I don't have to help."

Now that she's got Peter to back her up, she can't resist. "I don't want children when I grow up, either."

Lillian puts her cup down so hard that coffee slops into the saucer. She glares at Callie. "What do *you* know about anything! That's what women are for."

"But I don't like little kids."

"That's nonsense. When you have your own children, you'll love them."

An orange haze blurs her vision and sends hot fire through her veins. *But you don't love me. You wish you'd never had me. You just want me to have children so I'll be as miserable as you are.*

Anger rages through her like a grass fire in a high wind. While Lillian and Peter talk, she sucks in deep breaths and struggles to tamp down the flames.

"Callie, for heaven's sake, pay attention. Your brother just asked you a question."

"You want to go for a walk, kid? I'd like to see what's happened to the old homestead since last summer."

"Sure." She jumps up and heads for the door.

They stroll up the pasture road to the top field. The wheat is ripening, green stalks and heavy heads gilded by the August sun. They sit on a couple of flat sandstone outcrops by the fence. Peter draws his knees up, leans back against a fence post and lights a cigarette.

"It's beautiful country," he says, scanning the length of the valley.

"Dad says more people will come here, but I hope they don't." She presses her palms against the gritty warmth of the sandstone. Why does Lillian love him and not her? Is it because he's a boy?

Maybe her mother would love her, too, if she acted and thought the way Lillian says is right. But she doesn't want to be somebody she isn't.

She pushes the thoughts away. "How can you stand to live in the city?"

"I shut my ears to the noise," Peter says, "and carry myself in a way that tells people to leave me alone."

That doesn't work with Lillian. "I'm going to university when I'm through high school."

"What do you want to be?"

"A botanist. But I want to learn everything else there is to know, too."

Peter chuckles. A bumblebee, headfirst into one of the glowing blooms on a tall fireweed, mumbles in the same key. "You've got big ambitions."

"I want to run the farm, too."

"Could you get along with Dad? He's pretty set in his ways. And he's sixty-three, so he's not likely to loosen up." He lights another cigarette. "Get your education first. Then come back and farm if you're still of the same mind. What makes you think you want to be a botanist?"

"I love plants. They're the most interesting things in the world. Animals, too, but plants are better. And I like being close to the land."

"You'd probably end up teaching. Most scientific jobs are held by men."

"You're not saying I should get married and have kids, are you?" When she was little, Lillian was always telling her to wash doll clothes, or play with a toy tea set.

Peter knocks ash from his cigarette. "No, it's just how things are. Most women get married and have kids. All I'm saying is you shouldn't decide on a career until you're older and have more education. And experience."

He's trying to put her off. "I don't want to get married if it means cooking and housework and having kids. Why can't a woman be a botanist?"

"You're certainly bright enough." He frowns. "But I doubt if anyone would hire you."

"Why not?"

"Because women usually only work a couple of years and then get married. Employers want someone who's going to stick around for a long time."

"People take a lot for granted, don't they?" She'd thought this talk would be good, but fire is flickering in her belly again.

She slides her hand across the sandstone and, in a tiny crevice, feels something soft and pliant. It's a tiny plant, clinging to life in less than a teaspoon of soil. Further back is a bigger plant, in a wider crevice. Could these little green creatures, living on so little, someday break up the sandstone?

Peter reaches over and pulls one of her braids. "Look, if you want to be a botanist, I think that's great, but it won't be easy. And your ideas change as you grow up. Get your education first and then decide."

He doesn't understand that she knows, with every cell in her body, what she wants to do with her life. He talks like she has a craze that will fade in six months. "Yeah, okay." She is going to university, and it will be wonderful. Except for leaving the valley, which will hurt like hell.

But she can always come back.

After the noon meal, Callie offers to go with Peter to work on Kjell's land, but Lewis says, "No, take the day off. There'll be plenty to do later."

"Yes," Lillian says, "go find something to amuse yourself with. Dot and I are going to can green beans and you'll just be in the way."

Just like she's always been in the way.

She'd been looking forward to working and drinking coffee with the men, feeling like she belonged. Flames lick the wall of her chest. Do they just want her for work? And when there's no work, she's supposed to disappear?

Maybe they're going to talk about secrets and don't want her to hear. To hell with them, then. She'll walk down to the creek and explore its twists and turns. There might be new plants.

Her resentment carries her across the log bridge and a hundred yards down the other side of the creek before she remembers that she wants her conversations with Peter to be secret. Okay, so it's only right that other people can have private conversations, too. Still, it's irritating.

Should she tell Peter about what happened with her and Kjell? He'd explain what it was all about. But she can't; she promised she wouldn't tell anybody.

Hell and damnation, people are so frustrating! When she's a botanist, she'll go to some remote part of the world and live by herself while she discovers new plants.

Cross-legged under a shady clump of willows, she watches the sunlit water ripple over a bed of pebbles. Gradually the creek's music cools the flames inside her and sluices away the ashes. Sunlight filters through the willow leaves, toasting her back, and the rich smell of damp earth fills her nostrils.

The creek must begin as a tiny trickle, tumbling over cliffs in the Rockies, spreading rainbow glitter in the clear, cold air. Soon the trickle would become a stream, merge with others, dance down through the foothills.

Here the water is slow, seeming not to move at all. But in the sun-shot depths, its movement bends the trailing reeds downstream. A willow leaf floats aimlessly, catches for a moment on a protruding tuft of grass, then strays into the invisible tug of the current.

Sometimes she feels like a leaf being swept away to drown and disintegrate in the lake. Surely life doesn't have to be lived the way Lillian says. She removes her runners and dips her feet into the creek, the water piling up against her instep and rushing away over her toes.

Hot sun and water music make her drowsy and she's leaning back to pillow her head on the grass when Kjell's red pickup rumbles across the bridge. Instead of stopping in the yard, he goes to the top field, opens the gate, and drives through. His small, distant figure wrestles a barrel of gas into the truck.

It's not until he's driven down the hill and thundered across the bridge again that she realizes he didn't close the gate. She hurries up to the farmyard and then up the pasture road. If the animals get out, she and Lewis might never find them. Without Rosie and Buck, there'd be no beef for winter, no milk to drink, no butter for bread.

The cow and calf are grazing at the north end of the pasture, not even aware that freedom might have been theirs, and Silver is snoozing in a grove of poplars. Callie shuts the gate. She hadn't wanted to believe Lewis when he said Kjell was careless, but it's true.

At the barn, she climbs to the loft, balancing the sick, hollow feeling of climbing down again with the welcome Martha and the kittens will give her. Nobody else is glad to see her. The kittens are frolicking in the straw. Now and then, Martha grabs one, holds it

down with one paw, and licks it all over. Easy to tell she loves them.

If only she could find a way to hide the kittens, they wouldn't have to die. Impossible. She might be able to steal enough food, but there's no place to hide them that Lewis or Lillian wouldn't find.

She goes along the road to the oat field, intending to head down to the creek there and explore further to the north. In the black soil along the edge of the crop, the white caps of meadow mushrooms catch her eye. They're young, the caps firm, the gills pale pink, the delicate rings on the stems slightly torn. Perfect for eating.

She picks three to take home and compare with what *The Mushroom Handbook* says, then she'll come back with a pail and gather enough for supper. As she rises, she glimpses another flash of white further down the field.

These are new to her, but they're mushrooms, looking like folded umbrellas. The fleshy part is covered in satiny white scales and is two or three inches long, the stem even longer. She pulls one apart. The white gills aren't attached to the stem, the way they are in meadow mushrooms.

Odd that both fish and mushrooms have gills. But in *Flowering Earth*, Mr. Peattie says that the more a scientist knows about the animal and vegetable kingdoms, the less he sees any boundary between them. Plants don't have brains or muscles, but sometimes they act like they do.

At home, she places two of the mushrooms on white paper, gill side down, and goes to the kitchen for two tumblers to put over them so the spores won't blow away as they drift from mushroom to paper. Mr. Krieger says meadow mushroom spores are purplish brown.

She finds the picture of the new mushroom, called shaggy-mane, or *coprinus comatus*, and Mr. Krieger says it's edible. The description in the book matches exactly what she's got, and he says it's easily recognized, so there's no doubt they'll have a new mushroom treat tonight. Too bad she'll have to wait a few hours to see if the spores are black. She slices two samples in half, but she can't see much of the detail the book mentions.

When she returns from the field with a bucketful of mushrooms, Lillian is making supper. "Why did you bring these toadstools?" she says, picking up a shaggy mane.

"My mushroom book says they're very good to eat."

Lillian's lips curl in distaste. "Well, I've never seen or heard of them and I'm not going to risk being poisoned on your say-so. Throw them out."

Fresh flames crawl up her throat and flick at her tongue. Silent, she puts the shaggy manes in another pail. She'll bury them in the manure pile. Lewis will spread the manure on the garden in the fall and next year mushrooms will pop up all over the place. How busy Lillian will be, trying to get rid of them!

That evening she sits with Peter on the garden bench by the shed. Vivid pink and gold cloud streamers lie along the western horizon and above those are small puffy clouds with mauve underbellies, glowing rosy gray on top. She watches the cloud fire fade in the deepening twilight while he picks out *Don't Fence Me In* on his guitar for her.

Some of Peter's notes sound liquid, reminding her of the creek. "Water's powerful,

isn't it? I mean, it can destroy things and eat away mountains."

"All the four elements are powerful. We have to breathe air, but it can make tornados, too. We need water and fire, but one can drown us, the other burn us."

She turns that over in her mind while Peter puts down the guitar, lights a cigarette and blows the smoke toward the pale gleam of a crescent moon rising over the eastern hill. "Sounds right to me."

He picks up the guitar again and begins softly strumming *Chi-Baba, Chi-Baba*. "I guess I'm learning about fire; stars are burning balls of matter."

She knows that, but she's always thought of the stars as magic. A shining intelligence that could look down and know what she was thinking and talk to her.

It isn't true, though. They look cold and distant, but they're chunks of fire that could destroy her in a second if they fell to earth. They don't even know she exists, much less care what happens to her.

She nudges a tuft of grass with her toe. None of the elements knows she exists. The earth doesn't offer food and shelter; she has to take them.

Jake comes trotting around the side of the house and puts his head in her lap for a pat. She scratches his ears and rubs his head until he lies down at her feet.

Are animals the only creatures that love? There is no answer in the waning light; merely the chill of approaching darkness.

Before she goes to bed, she takes the photograph of Rory Calhoun from the shoe box and tacks it to the wall beside her table. In the dusk his eyes look at her and his smile says he loves her.

"Goodnight, Rory."

"Goodnight, Callie. Sweet dreams."

Chapter Nineteen

Callie takes one step up the attic stairs and Lillian says, "Knock first! He might be changing clothes."

Peter calls, "I'll be right down."

His holiday is already half over, and she hardly ever gets him to herself. He works with Lewis and Kjell all day and the evenings are full of chatter at one house or the other. But today is Sunday and he's promised to walk to the lake with her.

When they've passed the garden, Jake and Skipper racing ahead, she says, "Would the world come to an end if I saw you with no clothes on?" If men's bodies are like hers except for having pee things and flat chests, what's so awful about seeing them?

"No, but I might be a little embarrassed. I'm not used to people seeing me naked."

She kicks at a clump of grass. "Neither am I, except for Mom. She seems to think it's all right for her to look at me, but I'm not allowed to look at anyone else. She says showing your body isn't nice."

"Cut her some slack, kid. She's very old-fashioned. When she was young, women wore long skirts."

"In *Gone With the Wind,* women couldn't even show their ankles. That's silly. I think clothes are for keeping you warm and protecting your skin from bugs and bruises."

"Hey, that movie's on in town. Want to go see it?"

"Oh, yes! I've never been to a movie!" For a moment the sun is brighter, the air sweeter. A robin trills from a nearby poplar. "But Mom won't let me. She said I couldn't read the book, even if it did win a Pulitzer Prize."

"So how did you find out about the women not showing their ankles?"

"I know where Mom hides things."

Peter grins. "We won't tell her until afterwards."

It's wonderful to have a secret from Lillian and Lewis. They have secrets they won't tell her. "Why is Dad building an elk skeleton?"

"I don't know."

"But when people like Kjell ask me about it, I want to be able to tell them."

"It's none of Kjell's business."

He's saying it's none of hers either, but the question nags at her. So does the other mystery about Lewis.

"Do you know what Dad did years ago that Mom's still mad about?"

"No." He glances at her. "Don't worry about it. He couldn't have done anything really bad, or he'd be in jail."

"So why is Mom still mad?"

"She worries about what people think. If you got D's instead of As on your lessons, she'd be riled about that."

The dogs come back, circle around them with tails wagging as though to say, 'hurry up!' and race off again.

Peter says, "What do you want for Christmas?"

"I have a book about wildflowers, but only some of them. I want one that tells about the ones that grow here. Even better, one that tells about all flowers everywhere."

"Do you have a second choice?"

"A book about birds. What they're called and where they go in winter and everything."

A hundred yards ahead, Jake stops, raises his head, and sniffs the air. Both dogs start barking at something in a thick clump of chokecherries on the creek bank. Skipper rushes down the bank but Jake stands his ground.

"Hell! I bet it's a porcupine." She runs toward the shrubs, calling, "Skipper! Skipper, come back here!"

The dark green leaves of the choke cherry shudder. There's an agonized yelp and Skipper comes scrambling up the bank, pawing at his muzzle.

"Poor Skippy! Come here, boy." He comes, whimpering, a half dozen quills embedded in his face. She kneels and backs the dog between her thighs, trying to hold the squirming animal still and soothe him with her hands.

Peter squats and pulls out three quills, the dog yelping, his struggles becoming more frantic. The fourth quill refuses to budge. "We need a pair of pliers."

Skipper heads for home, stopping now and then to rub his face on the grass. When Callie and Peter catch up, he's whining at Kjell's door.

Kjell comes out, running a hand over his thinning hair. "Jesus! You poor little bugger." He squats and pets the dog, who can barely stand still for the pain.

"We got three out, but we need pliers for the rest."

Kjell goes inside. When he comes back, Dorothy is with him. "Did Jake get hit, too?"

"No," Callie says. "He had a run-in with a porcupine a long time ago. He knows to stay away from them."

"I'll take him to a vet if I have to," Kjell says.

When Lassie, the dog they used to have, got distemper and Lewis knew she was going to die, he'd taken her up in the pasture and shot her. He said he was putting her out of her misery. Even Lillian shed tears. Maybe if they'd got her to the vet, she'd still be alive. Callie swallows a sob; if Kjell takes Skipper to the vet, she'll help.

It takes three of them to hold Skipper while Kjell yanks the quills out. Callie has her hand on the dog's chest, and she can feel his heart thudding, the trembling of his flesh. Afterward, he runs in circles around them, then settles down in Kjell's arms for comfort.

Dorothy waves them into the house. "I just made a pot of coffee and some Lazy Daisy cake."

They sit around the kitchen table. Kjell is still cradling the dog. "Thank God it wasn't any worse."

Callie reaches over and strokes Skipper's head. He nuzzles her hand. It's too bad her private time with Peter got interrupted, but there's still the rest of the day.

"Aunt Dorothy, did you and Mom wear skirts down to your ankles when you were growing up?"

Dorothy laughs. "Not quite. My mother would have liked it if we had. She was pure Victorian."

"What does that mean?"

"Queen Victoria, like most people in England during her time, believed the body was immoral."

"You mean," says Kjell, grinning, "they thought sex was dirty."

"Kjell," Dorothy says, "That comment wasn't necessary."

"Is that why they thought people should always cover their bodies?" Callie asks.

"Not only their bodies." Dorothy passes the plate of cake around. "They even put little skirts on piano legs. I'm glad we're not so prudish anymore." She glances at Callie. "Well, most of us aren't. I've discovered your mother still leans that way."

"I guess so. There are lots of books she won't let me read, and words I'm not allowed to say. And she won't answer some questions because she says I don't need to know the answers until I'm married." For a second, she holds her breath, amazed at the ease with which those words rolled out of her mouth. Somehow, they seem disloyal.

"Heaven preserve us! You can ask me any questions you want." Dorothy stirs her coffee, a rhythmic clinking of spoon against cup. "That reminds me of something that happened when we were young." She puts the spoon down. "Now don't tell her I told you; she'd be very upset."

Callie leans forward, almost holding her breath.

"Lillian had a beau." Dorothy smiles at Callie. "You'd call him a boyfriend, I suppose. He was one of the local gentry; his people owned land and lived in a big house with servants. She met him at church, and they began going for walks together along the river. Being something of a brat, I used to follow and tease them."

Peter says, "Didn't girls have chaperones then?"

"Not always. A walk along the river on a Sunday afternoon was all right because a good many other people were doing the same thing. But he called her 'Miss Graves' and she called him 'Mr. Chatham.'"

"My grandparents called each other 'Mr.' and 'Mrs.' even after they'd been married forty years," Kjell says. His useless right eye is staring at Callie, and she realizes that she's so used to it now that she rarely notices any more.

"Well, Lillian wouldn't let Mr. Chatham walk her home. He asked if she was ashamed of their friendship, and she denied it. Finally, my mother, who'd heard all about the walks along the river, insisted she bring him home for tea."

"And did she?" Callie asks.

"Oh, yes. We all sat, prim and proper, in the drawing room and drank tea and ate little iced cakes while my mother politely quizzed Mr. Chatham about his family and education. And that's the last we ever saw of him."

"Why?"

"Because he realized we weren't gentry, like him. He wouldn't have married out of his class unless it was into the one above him."

"I'll be damned," Peter says, lighting a cigarette, "From the way I've heard Mom talk about the working class, I thought the family was gentry."

"Lord, no! We ran a pub, which was maybe one cut above working class, but it certainly wasn't gentry. Of course, my mother always had ambitions in that direction and so did Lillian. She hated serving behind the bar."

"How did she feel about losing her boyfriend?" Callie asked, taking another piece of the fresh, moist cake.

"She was angry. And ashamed, I think. It didn't help that the following week Mr. Chatham walked along the river with another girl. She was sure he and his new girlfriend were laughing at her."

Callie sucks icing from her fingers. Lillian must have felt awful, though the way she talks about England, she gave up a lot to come to Canada. But if she didn't like her life there, she had nothing to give up.

"I've seen pictures and she was a real beauty." Kjell reaches for his cigarettes. "But what made her marry a Canadian farmer? Especially a loner?"

"Lewis looked very dashing in uniform," Dorothy says. "He'd been wounded and decorated. Besides, he worked for the railroad then. I don't suppose she ever dreamed she'd end up on an isolated homestead. I'm sure she had no idea what Canada would be like. I know I didn't."

Kjell gives her hand a pat. "Are you sorry you came?"

"No. Life is so much freer here. People don't put on airs like they did at home. Most don't, anyway."

Callie licks the tip of her finger and picks cake crumbs off the oilcloth. So not everybody who's English thinks the garden of civilization is the most wonderful place in the world.

Half an hour later Callie sits beside Peter on the bridge over the creek, thinking about Dorothy's story and watching Jake pounce on mice in the tall grass. Skipper is home recuperating. "Is it because Mom wants to be upper class that she worries about what people think?"

"Partly, I guess. But I'd say she thinks society's rules and traditions are so important she doesn't want to be seen breaking any of them."

"But lots of them are really stupid!"

"I agree. But many people wouldn't."

The water in the creek is so calm it seems to be still. The sun's rays penetrate far enough, though, that she can see underwater reeds rippling over the pebbles.

"Mom doesn't think I know anything."

"Don't judge her too harshly. She's got common sense about a lot of things and she's trying to do the best she can by you."

"Sure doesn't feel like it."

"Well, hang on; you'll probably be going in to Fort St. John for school soon."

The sun glints on the flash of scales in the water. A small sucker darts toward the shelter of the overhanging bank, disappearing into the shadows. What is it doing down there? Fish lead secret lives under the water.

Peter tosses a small chunk of dried mud into the water, shattering its smooth surface. "Did she make you get confirmed or was that your idea?"

She blows out an exasperated breath. "Hers!"

"I thought it might have been. What happened?"

"I did something dumb. I wrote her a letter saying I didn't believe in God."

Peter laughs. "That would do it!"

"It wasn't funny. I had to take lessons and stand up in church and say that I did believe. I hate lying."

"Sometimes we have to lie to get along in this world, or at least, not say what we think. That is, if we don't want to argue with people all the time."

Sometimes people lie without actually saying anything. Lillian has never once said she was upper class. Callie wonders what Lewis thinks about it. He knows Lillian was a bar maid; he's told funny stories about things that happened in the bar when Lillian was

working. He says everybody's the same under the skin, so he wouldn't put any stock in being upper class. All he cares about is if people are honest and do their jobs right.

"I'll teach you a new word. Though maybe you know it already," Peter says. "A person who doesn't believe in God is an atheist."

"Do you believe in God?"

"I'm not sure. I don't spend much time thinking about it." He gives her a little punch on the shoulder and smiles. "And that means I'm an agnostic."

He looks at his watch. "Guess we'd better head home if we're going to be in time for lunch."

Food doesn't have much appeal; she's eaten too much cake. She glances at the old straw stack by the wheat field. It's the perfect day to hide up there and play with sky dreams. But Peter's only here for another week; sky dreams will have to wait.

Atheist. Agnostic. It's wonderful how there are names for everything if you can just discover them.

Chapter Twenty

On the way to town Thursday afternoon, the truck windows rolled down to catch the coolness of the wind, Callie tells Peter she's writing a fairy story.

"Will you let me read it?" He's handling Kjell's red pickup like delicate china, Lillian having twice reminded him to drive with care.

It's tempting; he might say he likes it. But he might make suggestions, too, and she doesn't want that. "It's not finished. I could mail it to you." She'll have to sneak the envelope out, so Lillian won't ask questions, and use her blackjack money to buy stamps.

"Okay. Do you write in the diary?"

"All the time." It's impossible to fit interesting days into five lines, though, so she just keeps writing until she's finished what she wants to say and hopes the book will last through the year. It might not; she used up three whole pages on what happened with Kjell and her.

A rain shower has turned the town streets to mud but the air is sweet and clean. Peter parks the truck in front of Russell's house just as Russell and Rita drive up.

Rita unlocks the door. "We got held up. Russ had a big deal going, selling a new combine. Russ, get the fire going, will you? I'll change out of my uniform."

Russell crumples paper and lays kindling in the old black McClary stove. "The movie starts at seven, so we've got to get some grub on quick." He lights the paper and orange-red flames are licking at the kindling when he puts the lid back on. "That was some deal, that combine."

He goes on talking about the sale while he fills a bucket from the water barrel in the corner. Instead of taking the lid off the kettle and pouring the water into that, he lifts the lid off the stove and drowns the fire.

He blinks. "Jesus Christ Almighty!"

Callie laughs so hard tears come to her eyes and Peter grins. Russell glares at them both.

Rita walks out of the bedroom. "What happened?"

"I should know better than talk while I'm doing stuff around here. I'll build the fire again."

Callie wipes the tears from her cheeks. She'd decided fire was the most powerful element. But water can kill fire and wear away rocks, so maybe it's the most powerful.

Rita looks at the sodden mess in the stove. "Why don't we eat at the Chinese café?"

Russell glances at his watch. "Yeah, good idea."

They park a block from Wong's, which is next door to the theater, and stroll along the boardwalk. She gets a whiff of hot french fries and seared steak as they near the café. Amazing how everything happens at once: coming to town with Peter, supper in a restaurant, her first movie.

She's so busy looking in store windows that she trips over a nail sticking out of a plank. Peter steadies her. "When's the town going to put in concrete sidewalks?"

"When they can raise enough taxes, I guess," Russell says. "Not likely to happen soon. The population is still only about seven hundred."

It's great walking into the café with her two good-looking brothers. The sun-bronzed men sitting there wear jeans, shirts, and cowboy hats or baseball caps. The women wear

short, permed hair, summer dresses, sandals, or canvas runners. She slides into a booth. Her shirt and jeans feel good but having a cowboy hat would be perfect.

The booths are painted dark brown, and the smell of cooking oil is strong. The waitress, a thin middle-aged woman in a pale green uniform, slaps four menus on the table and distributes glasses of water. "Howdy, Russell, Rita. How's it going?"

Russell tells her it's going fine and introduces Peter and Callie.

"I'm Verna Taylor. So, you're the one that was going to college in Vancouver, right? You up here to stay now?"

"No," Peter says. "I'm just here on holiday. I'll be heading back to the coast Saturday."

Verna glances at Callie as she sets out the cutlery. "Guess you won't be staying on the farm long either."

"Why not?" What's the woman talking about?

Verna gives her a look that makes her feel stupid. "You gotta be what — sixteen, seventeen? I'll bet the boys are after you like crazy. You'll be married and raising a family in a couple of years." She whips her order pad out of her pocket. "Okay, what'll you have?"

She hasn't had a chance to look at the menu. The other three order steak, which she's never had. "I'll have a steak too, please." She's curious to see what else she could have had, but Verna whips the menu out of her hand.

"I'll bring it back when you're ready for dessert."

When Verna leaves, Russell grins at Callie. "You should be feeling pretty good, what with Verna thinking you're nearly grown up. Next she'll be wanting to know how many boyfriends you've got."

A blush warms her face. She doesn't want boyfriends. "I wish I was sixteen, then people would quit telling me what to do."

Russell and Peter both laugh. Russell says, "Don't count on it. Rita tells me what to do all the time."

Rita smacks him on the arm. "That's because you don't know enough to come in out of the rain unless I tell you."

"Wait till I get you home, old lady," Russell says, leering at her. "I'll show you a thing or two."

How does Russell know when Rita's teasing and when she's serious? The kids at school in Poplar Ridge used to tease her and laugh because she always thought they meant everything they said. How do you learn that kind of thing?

There's a line-up for the theater and, inside, she's enveloped in warm, stuffy air, the buzz of talk and an odor she can't identify.

"What smells so good?"

"Hot buttered popcorn," Peter says. "Want some?"

She's never had popcorn before. As they move into the seating area, she takes a bite. The popcorn crunches into a hot, delicious explosion of salt and oil on her tongue.

They sit in a row midway down. The seats are plushy but cramped; she has to spread her knees to keep them from pressing into the seat in front.

People are coming down both aisles, but she doesn't recognize any of them. That's not strange; the only town people she knows are the Harrises and the three girls from confirmation class. Anyway, the theater is open Fridays and Saturdays too, so not everybody would come tonight.

The ceiling is so high! And the red velvet curtains up on the stage are huge. A rumpled picture appears, and the lights go out. When the curtains are pulled apart, the picture smooths into a news report of riots and killings in India. Her stomach knots, threatening to rise up into her throat, as the screen shows men being stabbed and shot, bodies piling up in the streets. She closes her eyes tight against spilled blood, screams of rage and pain.

After a couple of minutes Peter pokes her in the ribs. "You can look now. This is more your speed."

It's a Bugs Bunny cartoon. She knows about Bugs Bunny but it's amazing to see him running around on the screen and talking. Peter grins. "Great stuff, hey?"

A lot happens before the story starts. Music, *The Next Attraction*, more music, a list of actors in the movie.

It starts out just like the book. She hadn't imagined Scarlett's skirts would be so big or that the southern accents would be a little hard to figure out. But Tara is beautiful; no wonder Scarlett loved it so much.

And Rhett Butler! Rory Calhoun is handsome, but Clark Gable is elegant. It's not so much the dark hair and clipped mustache and fancy clothes; it's the way he talks and looks at people as if he's mocking them.

Her popcorn is gone by the time the Civil War gets going. Guns boom, fires blaze and Scarlett is desperate to get Melanie and her baby to Tara. The music is urgent, the noise overwhelming, and she's tense even though she knows Scarlett is going to escape from the Union soldiers.

It's so terrible when Scarlett gets to Tara and all the animals have been stolen and there's nothing to eat but a few sweet potatoes. Callie looks at the wrecked farm and aches for her.

Intermission is awful. Rita talks about how handsome Clark Gable is and Russell tells some man the wheat crops are going to be good this year. She hates being yanked out of a story. How can the others act like it doesn't matter? Anyway, her head is throbbing, full of images and words and voices jumbled together. She needs space and silence to sort through everything.

But when the film begins again, she's back in the story at once. Scarlett acted like a spoiled, silly brat in the first part; she never even read books, just primped for all those boyfriends. But now she's being so brave. Look at the way she killed that Yankee soldier. Look at the way she's struggling to get food for everyone.

In the last half of the movie, Scarlett marries Rhett, and the kissing scenes are good, but they don't explain, any more than the book did, what married people do together besides kiss.

Tears roll down her cheeks when Bonnie dies, but Rhett leaving Scarlett isn't so upsetting. It's too bad Scarlett is unhappy about it; she has Tara and that's the most important thing.

When they walk out of the theater it's dark, the stars hidden by streetlights. It's a shock to be back in real life. Her body is so tired she feels like she fought the Civil War

all by herself, but her mind is buzzing.

Peter wants to go to Wong's for coffee, but Russell and Rita say they're going home, tomorrow is a workday. Peter turns to Callie. "How about you?"

"Sure!" She's not going to miss a chance to go in the café with Peter. There can't be many people around here with a brother who goes to university.

Verna Taylor waits on them again. This time Callie gets a look at the menu. "Can I have a chocolate milk shake?"

"One coffee, one milk shake," Verna says and looks at Peter. "Figured you'd be coming back to farm with your dad, seeing as Russell isn't going to."

"No. Callie might take over, though."

Verna laughs. "Running a farm is men's business."

It's bad enough Lillian laying down the law; she's not going to put up with a complete stranger doing it.

"I don't see why I can't run the farm if I want to. In the movie, Scarlett O'Hara ran Tara."

"Oh, that's just a movie," Verna scoffs. "That's not real life. Don't you want to get married and have babies?"

"I don't like babies. And who wants to be stuck in a kitchen their whole life?"

"Well, you've got a few things to learn, kid. Getting married and having babies is what women do." Verna sticks her pencil behind her ear. "Another few years and you'll be singing a different tune."

When Verna has gone, Peter says, "Don't waste your breath. You'll never change her mind."

"I guess most women do get married and have kids, like you said." Callie rips at her napkin. "But I want to make up my own mind, not just do what everybody else does. Why do grownups — well, not you — think they know best just because they're older? That doesn't mean they're smarter than me."

"No, but they've had more experience in living."

For a moment that stops her. "Okay, but they only know about the lives they want to live. They don't know anything about the kind of life I might want."

Verna brings the shake and coffee and bustles away.

"Most people are afraid of anything strange," Peter says, his face thoughtful. "They don't understand people who are different, so they try to put them down. If you do anything out of the ordinary, you'll have to put up with a lot of carping."

That's nothing new. Lillian carps at her all the time. The milk shake is delicious, and Peter has two refills of coffee while she sips it to the last drop, watching people's faces and listening to Peter talk about stars. When the café is almost empty and Verna is staring at them from behind the counter, she says, "I guess we'd better go. Mom will think we had an accident, or the truck broke down."

Peter laughs. "And when she finds out we're fine, she'll be mad because we kept her up worrying all night. I've seen that movie before, Callie." He takes her hand, and they head for the truck.

"Did you like the real movie?"

"It was well done. Vivien Leigh is a good actress."

Of course, that's who Scarlett is in real life. But she doesn't want to think about actors and costumes and cameras; that spoils the story. Scarlett, Rhett, Mammy and Tara are all

real, part of a living place and time.

Mammy is as black as Abraham Tanner. But she was a slave, like all the black people in the movie. Maybe Lillian doesn't like Negroes because they were slaves. But Indians aren't slaves, and she doesn't like them either.

The drive home is a different kind of movie. The town is magical, lights twinkling from windows, streetlights shining yellow on the road. Soon they're out of town and the night is black except for the truck headlights bouncing on the graveled highway. Sometimes they meet another vehicle, the lights blinding her when they sweep around a corner or leap over the top of a hill. Monsters of the night, with great staring eyes. Monsters made by humans, though, nothing to do with the earth.

It's funny, but though she knows now the earth isn't aware of her, she still loves it. Walking, she can feel it pulsing under the soles of her feet. Maybe the earth and sun and stars do love her in some mysterious way she'll never understand. Her body warms with happiness as she thinks of the valley waiting for her.

It's sad the earth can't talk to her. Peter will be gone in a few days, and it's hard to remember he cares when he's far away. There's Lewis but a lot of the time he lives in a private world inside his head.

Sure enough, Lillian is waiting up. "Where have you two been? Callie, you get to bed this instant."

While she undresses and gets into her cot, she can hear Lillian scolding and Peter explaining that the movie was very long. She shuts their voices out and lets Tara take over her mind again.

In the morning it takes Jake three tries to get her out of bed. All night, Scarlett drove carriages over the bodies of dead soldiers or up wide, curving staircases in Atlanta, with guns thundering and flames roaring from every window. It's good to wake up in Herron Valley and see Rory Calhoun smiling at her from the wall.

Clark Gable may be more elegant, but Rory is the one she wants beside her as they ride into the sunset. He won't make fun of her the way Rhett made fun of Scarlett.

After breakfast she does her chores, leaving Peter to sit with Lillian, drinking coffee. When she gets back, Lillian is saying, "Well, you can always farm here if you change your mind. There's plenty of land in the valley; you could work with your father the way Kjell does. And find a nice girl and start your family."

Lewis walks in behind Callie, carrying a bucket of milk. "Leave the boy alone. He's made up his mind what he wants to do."

Lewis and Peter must have talked about it when they were working on Kjell's land. Lewis doesn't think much of book learning, but he's big on letting people learn from their own mistakes.

Lillian's face goes pink and puffy, but she doesn't say another word. Callie can feel their thoughts flying around the room and bouncing off each other, pressing down on her so she can hardly breathe. She wishes she could say something that would make everything all right again, but nobody will listen to her.

Maybe if she leaves, they'll say what they want to say and let the air smooth itself out again. "I'm going for a little walk, okay?" Lillian merely gives her a look, and she escapes

into the sunshine.

Beyond the barn is an abandoned garden. They grew vegetables there the first year, before Lewis decided that the land by the spring was better. A weathered silver-gray rail fence protects the old garden from grazing animals and foxtails grow long and thick. The brush-like spikes of flowers do look like a fox's tail, reddish-brown on one side, creamy on the other.

She sits on her heels, watching them change color as the breeze blows them one way, then another. When she runs her hand upward over the brushes, they feel smooth and silky, and she wants to bury her face in them. Yet when she runs her hand downward, they are stiff and prickly, sharp against her palm. She'd like to take some in the house, but they'll dry out and fall apart. Anyway, Lillian would call them weeds.

When they first grew here, she imagined fairies living among them. She designed costumes and gave the fairies names and rules to live by and missions to accomplish in the world of humans. She herself was a messenger and peacemaker for both fairies and humans.

Do Amazon fairies eat shaggy-mane mushrooms? Next year there will be hundreds in the garden for them.

A door bangs. Peter and Lewis are just coming out of the house. They'll head for the field, and she'll be able go in the house without having to shrink from angry voices. The door bangs again. Lillian heads for the garden.

Callie changes her mind about going home and taps at Kjell's door.

"Come in, Callie," Dorothy says.

With a steaming mug of coffee in front of her and a plate of sugar cookies to dunk, she takes a deep breath and plunges in. "Aunt Dorothy, why do married people stay together if they're always arguing?"

Dorothy raises her eyebrows. "Because they love and need each other. Because they promised to stay together."

"Mom is mad at Dad because of something he did a long time ago and they were fighting this morning over how Peter should live his life."

"I think that's Peter's business, don't you?"

Callie nods. "Sure. But they still argue about it."

"Most married people argue. That doesn't mean they're not fond of each other." Dorothy stirs sugar into her coffee. "Marriage is like a bargain. The man agrees to feed and clothe the woman and she agrees to have his children and cook and keep the house clean. It seems to have worked out well enough for your parents."

"Mom talks about stuff like that as being a duty."

"That's how she was raised. Probably Lewis, too. But who would cook and clean and mend for him if not Lillian? Who would feed and clothe her if Lewis didn't? It's not just duty, it's what they agreed to do for each other by getting married."

"Food and clothing aren't romantic."

"There's more to it than that."

"Dad's a lone wolf, though. I think he'd like to live by himself."

"Even a loner needs companionship and I think Lewis prefers Lillian's company to anyone else's. He seems to think most people are fools. I'm sure they love each other, no matter how much they disagree."

"They don't act like it."

"Perhaps they do in private."

Callie dunks a cookie and loses half in the coffee. Her mind drifts back to the marriage bargain. "Sounds like Mom is trapped, if she has to be married to get food."

"She is, in a way. She has no training for anything, so she can't look after herself. If she left Lewis, she'd have to find another man to provide for her. She won't leave him, though; he's a good man."

"I'm never going to get trapped that way." But Lillian wants her to be trapped, wants every woman to be trapped. Why does she think cooking and scrubbing all day and being dependent on a man is the only way to live?

"It's all right if you find the right partner. Kjell and I have a lot of fun together."

"Do you think Mom and Dad got married because they had fun together?" She manages to fish the soggy cookie out with her teaspoon.

Dorothy laughs. "Of course."

"What was it Dad did a long time ago?"

"He's the one who should tell you that. All I can say is that he feels guilty because of it, just as he feels guilty about moving Lillian out here to the bush when she didn't want to come."

On the way back to the house, Callie decides that if she ever wants to be like someone else, she'll pick Dorothy. There's no doubt Dorothy can look after herself.

In her room, she pulls the last two pages of the story from their hiding place among her old assignments and chews the end of her pencil. Writing a story is harder than she'd thought, but also more fun. Words are like foxtails; they aren't always easy to handle. Besides, there are so many words, and some have so many meanings it's hard to choose. How does Mr. Peattie find such lovely ones? After a while she begins to write.

When Callie hears the screen door bang, she hides the pages again. She can hardly wait to send it to Peter. It's a real story, with adventures, and it will have a happy ending. Even though the things in the story never happened, they could happen if fairies were real. So, like her PE assignments, a story is a kind of true lie. Mr. Peattie's stories about plants are better, though. They're really true.

Chapter Twenty-One

Bright-eyed robins perch on the garden fence, preening themselves or caroling clear notes into the early morning sunlight. They're waiting for Lillian and Dorothy to pull the last of the dew-damp beets so they can hop down and look for worms in the loosened soil. Callie follows the women, cutting off beet tops and putting the roots into buckets, her hands muddy, her nostrils filled with the rich odors of earth and slashed beet tops.

The leaves and stalks will be tossed over the fence for Rosie and Buck and the horses to eat. The manure they make from that will be added to the pile outside the barn, then plowed into the garden to feed the earth. Everything goes back to the earth one way or another.

Callie straightens and looks south, imagining she can see over the hills to Vancouver. Peter's been gone only a few days, but it seems like months. She wishes he would hurry up and write, tell her what he's doing and thinking.

There's no time to fret about it, though. Lillian, a one-woman food factory, has been harvesting vegetables from the garden and canning everything she can lay her hands on. Beans, peas, tomatoes, beets, even milk from Rosie now that Buck is weaned. Eggs, too, covered in isinglass.

Isinglass is an odd word. Icing glass. No, that doesn't work; icing isn't transparent. I sin glass. I sing, lass. Anyway, the word is more interesting than the gelatin it describes. Lillian soaks the isinglass in water, dilutes it, and half fills earthenware crocks. The fresh eggs that are put into it are used in winter when the hens aren't laying. The crocks are kept in the cellar, where it's cool, and one of the worst jobs Callie gets, when Lillian wants to bake a cake, is to stick her hand into that cold gloop to fish out eggs.

Last week carrots, turnips and onions were topped and buried under a thin layer of earth in the cellar. Jars of mustard pickles and beet pickles and choke cherry jelly have been added to the rows of raspberries, saskatoons and green tomato pickles from earlier in the summer and there's a crock of beet wine fermenting, the sharp smell of yeast permeating the house. Callie could do without the beet pickles, but Lewis loves them.

Shelling peas had been the most monotonous job. She'd sat for hours between buckets of full pea pods and a tub for the empties. She'd shell a couple of dozen pods into the bowl in her lap until her mind seized up with boredom and she'd find herself putting empty pods in with the peas and tossing peas into the discard tub. But the peas are done and, with luck, the beets will be done in another hour.

She's reaching for another beet when Lillian screams.

"Oh my God! Fire!"

Images from when she was six flash through her mind. The Morrison's house in Poplar Ridge burning, falling in on itself, windows breaking, showering glass. The Morrisons, stunned and grimy, staring at the smoking remains.

Callie's heart bumps against her ribs as her eyes follow Lillian's horrified gaze.

Flames are shooting out of the chimney.

What if the whole house goes up? It could, just like the Morrisons' did. They'd lose everything, clothes, food, books, treasures.

She reaches the house first. Lillian and Dorothy, their round faces flushed, puff across the plank bridge over the spring behind her. The kitchen stove is roaring, the copper

boiler of water bubbling like a witch's cauldron.

Lillian pulls the boiler to one side, takes the lid off the stove and ladles water over the flames. "Get up on the roof, Callie! I'll hand you a bucket of water out of the attic window."

Oh, Not the roof! Please, not the roof!

But Lillian and Dorothy are too heavy to climb up there. She races to the attic and climbs out the north window onto the shed roof.

Don't look down.

Don't look down, then you won't fall.

The shed roof slants but isn't steep. From there it's possible to climb onto the main roof, which slopes east and west. She edges her way along the shed roof, hugging the north wall of the attic and clinging to the eaves of the main roof. Near the edge of the shed roof — *don't look down!* — the main roof is at waist level. She leans across it, swallows, lets go with her feet and drags her body inch by inch onto the gritty roofing.

Lillian hollers from the attic window, "Hurry up!"

She crawls up the slope, clinging to the edge of the roof until she's kneeling above the attic window. It takes Lillian and Dorothy heaving together to lift the full bucket high enough for her to reach the handle.

She can't crawl and carry the bucket at the same time. And she has to hurry, before the searing heat in the chimney catches the house on fire. She gets to her feet, hanging onto the pail with both hands, and looks at the flames shooting out of the chimney.

A black curtain falls over her eyes. But the flames are still there. She hears papers being ripped, hears a thin screaming above angry shouts. Her knees tremble and fold. Water slops out of the bucket over her legs.

"Hurry!" Lillian shouts again, and the black curtain is gone. She struggles to her feet, her gaze fixed on the water and edges toward the chimney.

The flames aren't so high now but they're still strong enough to scorch her face and the acrid wood smoke brings tears to her eyes. She hefts the heavy bucket of water and throws it at the flames. The water sizzles and spits as it hits the chimney and a cloud of steam and smoke bursts out of the opening.

"Here's more water." Lillian yelling from the attic window.

The second trip isn't any quicker. She knows now that she can stand up if she leans toward the peak, but every step takes an effort of will that has her gasping for air. The second bucket of water goes directly down the chimney.

"Is it out?" Lillian calls.

"I think so. There's no smoke now."

She sidles back toward the edge of the roof, lies down flat and wriggles to the edge, so she can drop the pail to Lillian's waiting hands. How is she going to get back down when she doesn't dare look? She inches backwards down the slope on her belly, watching the peak above to judge if she's gone far enough.

Now she must look.

Her knuckles white, she grips the edge of the roof and peers down. A wave of dizziness, then nausea. But the shed roof is there. Only four feet below but it feels like a hundred. She eases the lower part of her body over, her feet dangling in the air, the edge of the roof cutting into her waist. Another six inches and she will be on the shed roof. But if she slides that far, there'll be no going back. What if the shed isn't there anymore?

Stop imagining things!

She grits her teeth and lets her body drop, her feet thumping on the gentle incline of the shed roof. Shuffling sideways, she hurries, frantic to reach the attic window. When she drops inside, onto the solid, level floor, her knees almost give way again.

"It's a good thing you were here," Dorothy says. "I don't think I could have got up on that roof."

Lillian is fussing around the chimney where it comes up through the floor. "Doesn't seem to have damaged anything." She stares up at the roof where the chimney goes outside. "I just hope there's nothing smoldering up there."

By the time Lewis and Kjell come walking home from the field down the road, where they've been stooking oats, Lillian has cleaned the soggy ashes and bits of wood out of the kitchen stove and relit the fire.

Dorothy brings the last pail of beets to the shed and says, "You didn't need to light the fire again. I could have made dinner for everyone."

"I think it's safe enough." Lillian empties a jar of deer meat into a saucepan and sets it over the heat.

After he's examined the stove pipe, Lewis agrees. "It was just the soot burning off. I should have cleaned that pipe in the spring."

"Well, it certainly gave me a turn," Lillian says.

"Let the fire go out again. I'll give the chimney a good going over this afternoon."

None of them realize how scared she was up on the roof. But she knows now she could do it again, could be as brave as any grownup. Not unless it was a matter of life and death, though.

After dinner, Lewis says, "You go help Kjell finish the stooking."

"I'm not very good at it." It takes her three times as long to put a stook together as it does Lewis or Russell, who can manhandle two sheaves at once. Probably Kjell can, too. One sheaf at a time is all she can manage.

"You do well enough. I want that field finished by tonight; it could rain tomorrow."

She tucks the most recent pages of the fairy story inside her shirt, takes the thermos of tea and the sandwich that Lillian had already prepared for Lewis, picks up her leather gloves and heads for the barn. In the loft, she adds the pages to the ones in the package and considers alternative hiding places. The men will be bringing in the oats soon and she doesn't want the story buried behind a ton of sheaves all winter.

The chicken house seems the only answer. Not inside, though. At the back of the building, she folds the package and squeezes it up under the eaves, on the sill where the rafters rest. It'll be safe from the weather, and she can move it back to the barn loft when the harvest is in.

That done, she calls Jake and walks down the road to the oat field. The sun is hot, but there's an autumn spiciness in the air: ripe grain, dry grass, and a heady, tumbling feeling inside that makes her want to run and yell, or lie on the hillside and soak up all the sunlight she can before the white gates of winter close again.

Kjell is at the far end of the field. She puts her thermos and food next to his on the shady side of a stook.

"Your dad fixing up the chimney?" His arms and face are brown and freckled, as though he's already stored all the sunshine his body can handle and it's leaking out.

"Yes. He sent me to help so we can finish today." She feels compelled to say that, to remind him that Lewis wants the field done, in case he's forgotten. Lewis says Kjell is inclined to be lazy. It's true he doesn't work as hard as her father, but why should he? His truck and tractor are almost new, and he has no animals to look after.

Kjell glances at the sheaves that haven't yet been stooked. "Don't think I'd have a problem finishing on my own." He smiles at her. "Good to have company, though."

She walks down to the creek side of the field, Kjell's smile glowing in her mind, and starts working back toward the road. The sheaves are lighter than she remembers from last year — or maybe she's stronger now — and sometimes she carries two at a time. Not often; there's no hurry. It's good to be outside in sun heat and earthy smells with Kjell close by, good to build firm stooks that will shed the rain. Now and again she looks up, watching the way he moves, his arms picking up sheaves as though they weigh nothing, remembering how they felt around her waist.

Does he think about what happened between them? Does he want to do that again? Her skin thrills in anticipation. But he might not. She doesn't know how people think about things like that. And beneath the yearning for his touch is an uneasy feeling. He told her to keep it a secret so does that mean it's wrong? But his touching her can't upset other people if they don't know about it.

"How about some grub?" Kjell calls. He's retrieved their thermoses and paper bags and is sitting with his back against a big stook, facing the creek. Her breath catches in her throat. If he's going to do anything, it will be now, when they can't be seen from the buildings.

She sits on the stubble beside him, leans back against the pale golden sheaves and eats her sandwich. The sharp Cheddar cheese makes her mouth water. Kjell munches an apple, and she can almost taste the sweetness of apple juice as she listens to him biting into the crisp skin.

She pours tea into the thermos top, the clean aroma wafting in fragrant waves to her nose. The first sip burns her tongue, and she puts the top down. "It's hot!"

"So am I," Kjell says, looking at her over the edge of his coffee as though waiting for a signal.

"You've been working too hard." She has a feeling that's not what he meant but there's no other answer.

He puts his coffee down in the stubble and lights a cigarette. "I keep forgetting you're only twelve." The smoke drifts across her face, tantalizing, forbidden.

He's talking in code again and it isn't fair. "What difference does it make how old I am? Mom always says you're just as old as you feel."

He butts the cigarette against a pebble. "How old do you feel?"

"I don't know."

He puts his arm around her, pulls her close, puts his other hand on her breast. "Old enough for this?"

"Yes." Her heart thuds against her ribs.

Her nipples go hard the moment his thumb caresses them, and he pulls her shirt up, tucking the ends over her shoulders. The sun and his warm hands bathe her in heat. She leans her head back, closes her eyes, lets herself be taken over by the rapture.

After a moment the hands stop, and she opens her eyes. He puts his mouth over one nipple. The hot, wet swirling of his tongue sends a flood of trembling heat through her body. She moans. His hands slide down her sides to her jeans, begin to unbutton them.

And stop.

He jumps to his feet. "God damn it to hell!" He walks a few steps away, his back to her.

"What's the matter?" She pulls her shirt down, chilled. Is he angry with her? "Did I do something wrong?"

"You don't know anything, do you?"

Not about this. Her whole body is trembling with desire for his hands. "No. Are you going to tell me?"

"Somebody sure as Christ should. Hasn't your mother ever told you what happens between men and women?"

"No."

He swears again.

"Are you mad at me?"

He turns around to face her, the muscles in his jaws taut. "Yeah, you light my fire every time I see you." He takes a deep breath.

Fire. What does he mean, fire? He's angry and she thinks of the flames that flicker around Lillian's head when she's angry. Her stomach tightens into a knot. People fire is terrible. And terrifying.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He empties his coffee on the ground and puts the top back on his thermos. "I'm going to finish the stooking. You get the hell on home before I change my mind and show you what it's all about."

Hot with a shame she doesn't understand, she heads for the creek. Jake gets up from his shady bed behind a stook and follows her. In the creek bottom, hidden in a clump of willows, she drinks tea until her heart beats normally and her knees quit shaking.

She places one hand on the grass to boost herself upright and something moist squishes under her fingers. On her knees, she examines the blood-red stain on her skin and pulls up a long, sprawling stalk with large sharp-pointed triangular leaves and pulpy, bright red fruit attached directly to the stem. The fruit is shaped like a raspberry, though not so dark in color. What can it be? She looks around and sees more of the plants, so it's safe to take a whole one to check against *Wild Flowers*.

As she climbs the bank, the uprooted plant dangling from one hand, a faint chorus of honking makes her look up. A ragged vee of Canada geese high overhead, flying south. The sudden ache in her chest takes her breath away. If only she could fly with them, go wherever they're going.

When Callie comes up the road from the log bridge, Dorothy is pulling carrots from her little garden. "I thought you were helping Kjell."

"He's almost finished. He said I could come home."

"Well, good. It's too bad you have to work so hard. Kids your age should be out having fun."

She wonders what Dorothy means by having fun. All she knows is that life would be a lot simpler — and probably more 'fun' — if people didn't keep tangling up her thoughts and feelings and treating her like a fool.

When she reaches the farmyard, it occurs to her that there's nobody at Kjell's house. She doesn't know where Lewis and Lillian are, and she doesn't care. For once, she's going to do what she wants and to hell with everybody.

She walks toward Kjell's house, trying to look like someone who has business in the barn beyond, and slips into the kitchen. His cigarette papers are on the windowsill. She pockets them and heads toward the shop where Lewis keeps a tin of pipe tobacco.

The cigarette she rolls is sloppy, but that won't change how it tastes. She takes a box of kitchen matches off the work bench, leaves her thermos and the strange plant beside the lean-to, and climbs up through the pasture to the end of the wheat field where nobody can see her.

She lights up, sucks her lungs full of smoke the way men do and coughs until the tears come. The taste is a complete surprise. It's foul. It burns her tongue and makes her feel like throwing up. How can this be? It smells wonderful when Lewis smokes it. Why do Dorothy and Kjell and her brothers enjoy it so much?

Maybe it's just a matter of getting used to it. She buries the evidence underneath a rock and decides to steal more tobacco when she gets the chance. People can treat her like a baby if they want; she's going to do this grown-up thing, no matter how hard it is.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Below the dark green of the jack pine forest on the western ridge, the valley is changing color. Aspen leaves like miniature yellow suns rustle in the breeze and, one by one, drift down to gleam in the dry, brown grass. The tough, tawny leaves of the willows float in spiraling loops to the sluggish current in the center of the creek and sail slowly southward on water the color of pale amber tea. The air is cooler and, on some days, has a bite that foreshadows savage winter winds.

In this first week of September, with the valley shimmering in shades of gold and brown beneath the sun's mild warmth, Callie is drawn toward the hills. In blissful silence, she soaks up light, strokes yellow poplar leaves, searches for mushrooms. The mosquitoes are gone now and the flies, drugged with mellow autumn heat, bumble about looking for a place to sleep the winter away.

She's found more of the strange plant and picked a pint of its bright red fruit to press and strain for ink. The pale ink fades quickly, but the stain on her white tee-shirt seems permanent, much to Lillian's disgust. Nothing in *Wild Flowers* comes even close to what she's found and no one in the family can put a name to it, so she's sent details and drawings of the leaves and fruit to Peter and asked him to look it up in the university library. Someone, somewhere, must know what the plant is and what it's good for. Until she finds out, she's calling it Pink Ink.

But most days are too busy for roaming or even looking at the eighth-grade assignments piled on her table. Harvest is in full swing, and Lillian keeps her working. Russell is on holiday and has rented a combine to work the field at the top of the pasture hill, while Kjell brings truckloads of wheat to the granaries halfway down the hill.

Meals are festive; the wheat berries are ripe and fat and heavy, not a touch of frostbite on them. Lillian keeps talking about a new winter coat, but Lewis says she'd better wait and see how much money is left after he's paid the bank and put a down payment on the combine.

Lillian sighs and says it's too bad all the money gets plowed back into the farm. "We're slaves to the land, and it should be the other way around."

Land can't be enslaved. Nature is much more powerful than human beings. Farmers cultivate the soil so it will give back food but it's a risky bargain because the weather doesn't always cooperate. Anyway, like Lewis says, they haven't starved yet. But Lillian doesn't like uncertainty. She probably wants Lewis to work for somebody and bring home regular wages.

Callie stands at the front room window gazing at the valley while she waits for Lillian to call her for the next errand. Lewis would hate working for somebody else. He works hard for himself, but he can decide when and how to do things. He even hates taking things from the government; he says it's against his principles. Lillian wants him to apply for the Family Allowance for Callie, but he won't.

"I can look after my family without any help from those buggers in Ottawa. This country will go to wrack and ruin if we don't get the Conservative Party back in power."

She's not sure she likes his principles. That money would buy a bridle and saddle. Or a microscope. If the elevators pay Lewis enough for the wheat, she might talk him into at least the bridle. But the saddle and the microscope will fall in the same category as

Lillian's winter coat.

As Callie is turning away from the window, a movement on the far side of the field catches her eye. An animal, tawny as the leaves of the autumn willow. A cougar? No, it's a deer. Coming closer, bounding along, and slowing to a walk on the near side of the field. A small set of antlers crowns his head. He stops to crop grass, now and then raising his head to sniff and look at the farmyard.

"Mom? There's a deer across the creek."

Lillian hurries in from the kitchen. "Oh, if only your father were here!" Yesterday he'd been just down the road in the little field, loading oat sheaves onto the hayrack, but today he's up on the hill with Russell, learning how to operate the combine. "We need meat. There's not a scrap left in the cellar and it's much too expensive to buy."

She gets the rifle from the corner of her parents' clothes closet, along with a box of shells. But no matter what she presses or pulls, she can't figure out how to get the shells in. Lewis has promised to teach her how to use it, and the 12-gauge shotgun, when she's older and strong enough to handle such heavy guns.

"You can work the .22 all right," Lillian says.

"The rifle is different." She glances out the window to check on the buck. He's moved a hundred yards further south and is up to his belly in tall grass and saskatoon bushes. Then he's gone. She blinks. He didn't run away, or she'd have seen him. "I think he's lying down."

"Go get your father or Russell. I'll keep watch."

She walks, almost tiptoeing, to the barn and leads Silver to the corral so she can get on from one of the rails. Too bad Lewis hasn't taught her how to use the rifle. She'd be a hero if she shot that deer, just like Theseus killing the Minotaur. She walks Silver up the first slope, imagining herself creeping through the grass, taking aim, one shot through the head. Coming back to say, as if it meant nothing, "Got a deer. I need help to get it home."

Past the last granary, she kicks her heels into the mare's ribs, and they fly up the hill to the gate. She leaves it open; the cattle are down in the northwest corner of the pasture. The combine is stopped a quarter of a mile away, funneling grain into the truck. Lewis sees her and climbs down from the cab, Russell right behind him. He grabs the halter as Silver skids to a halt.

"You set fire to the house again?"

"No! There's a deer bedded down across the creek."

"Where?" Russell's voice is urgent, commanding. She explains where she saw the buck, the words barely out of her mouth before he's up on Silver and kicking her into a gallop again. In no time he's over the brow of the hill and gone.

Lewis and Kjell act as if nothing has happened. They finish emptying the combine, shut down the motor and fiddle about with the controls before they get into the Fargo.

Kjell drives and she gets to sit squished in the middle, smelling grease and smoke and wheat dust and the hot gassy odor of the truck. Kjell's upper arm is warm against her shoulder and the memory of his hand on her breast makes her skin tingle.

"That deer have a young one with it?" Lewis asks.

"No. It's a buck."

He doesn't mind shooting deer out of season, but he won't kill a doe with fawns. Russell says the one time they went hunting elk, Lewis wouldn't even shoot the bull elk they saw.

Kjell backs the Fargo up to the last granary. "I might as well make up a load and head for Dawson Creek with it."

He looks at Callie, then away, as they climb out of the cab. Lewis walks around to the other side of the granary – likely for a pee – and Kjell says, "You want to come for the ride?"

The question and the warmth in his face send little thrills up her spine. She's been waiting and hoping for two whole weeks that he'd get over being mad. He might even explain everything.

A rifle shot cracks, echoes through the valley. Russell heads down into the creek bottom, the rifle cradled ready in his arms. A moment later he reappears on the other side, elbowing his way through the brush. He bends to look at something, then rises, pushes his cap back on his head and starts walking back to the yard. That means the bullet went through the brain and the deer didn't suffer.

"I'd like to go," she says, putting all the feeling she can into the words, "but I'll have to help can the deer." She'd give a year off her life to sit with him in the truck and have him touch her for a whole afternoon, to find out what else he might do, but Lillian will never let her go.

"Out of season, isn't it?" he says. His lips quirk in a wry smile. "Guess the deer isn't the only one."

What does he mean by that?

Lewis comes back and says, "Help me harness the team. We'll have to take the wagon to get the deer."

Kjell's up in the truck box now, setting the auger to load more grain. She hunches her shoulders and follows Lewis to the barn. She missed her chance to be a hero, and now she's missed the chance to feel the delicious fever that runs through her flesh when Kjell's hands stroke her skin.

But there will be another time. She'll make sure of that, somehow.

Kjell is gone by the time Lewis and Russell come back with the deer. They hang it by the heels from a barn rafter and send her for the washtub.

She could stay while they slit the deer's throat and drain the blood and guts into the tub, but it bothers her too much. Deer meat tastes good only when it's nothing more than a plateful of stew. If she watches the men skin it, and remembers what it looked like an hour before, running free, she won't want to eat it. Maybe it's just as well she didn't know how to use the rifle.

In the house, she helps Lillian strip the kitchen and front room tables, even her own study table. Dorothy comes over and they spread sheets on the tables, bring empty glass sealers up from the cellar and sharpen knives. By the time the men bring the carcass into the house, the water in the copper boiler is heating and Lillian has sterilized the sealers. Lewis saws the carcass into quarters while Russell takes the tub of entrails, head, feet and hide, to bury deep in the earth at the corner of the oat field.

Lewis could easily build a deer skeleton from the bones instead of searching for scarce elk bones. Once the deer bones have aged the game warden wouldn't be able to tell when the animal was killed.

Lillian says, "Do you want a roast, Dot? Or the heart and liver?"

"I'll take the roast. Kjell doesn't like liver."

"The liver's the best part." Lillian sounds indignant, as though Kjell had insulted her. "Well, we'll have it for breakfast tomorrow with fried potatoes and onions and enjoy every bite."

Lillian likes kippers, too. The garden of civilization doesn't seem very civilized when it comes to food.

Lewis cuts two roasts from a haunch. Lillian puts them on a plate and covers them. "It's too bad we have to eat these when they're so fresh. The meat would be much better if it could hang for two or three days."

"You don't want the game warden coming by and finding a deer hanging in the barn," Lewis says, cleaning the saw. "We'd have to pay a fine."

"He isn't likely to show up for no reason, is he?" Dorothy asks.

Lewis snorts. "Wouldn't be the first time some bastard reported a rifle shot just to make himself important." When he goes out, Callie hooks the latch on the screen door, though that wouldn't keep the game warden out if he wanted to come in. Barring the heavy door and pulling the latchstring inside would work but be a dead giveaway that something bad is happening.

Callie works on her own table, cutting strips of meat away from the bone, dicing them and filling sealers. Lillian adds water, pepper and salt and puts the closed sealers into the water bath. It's the cooking that takes the time and the first batch is still not done by the time they finish and put the sheets to soak in cold water.

"I'll make dinner at my place." Dorothy takes off her bloody apron and puts it in the tub with the sheets.

"Callie, you go help Dot. There's nothing more you can do here for the moment."

While Dorothy simmers meatballs in tomato sauce, Callie peels potatoes and puts them on to boil. It's a relief to get away from the smell of raw meat.

"Nice to have the stove on for cooking these days." Dorothy holds her hands over the heat for a moment. "I can feel a touch of winter in the air."

"I know. We're climbing toward December."

Dorothy hands her a stack of plates. "What do you mean, climbing?"

"Well, I think of the year as a clock. December's at the top, at twelve. March is at three o'clock, June at six, September at nine."

"That makes sense, there being twelve months. Is that what made you think of it?"

"I don't know." Callie pauses. "I guess it's the way the hands move, too. It's such a long, slow struggle up the clock to December. That's the darkest, coldest time of year and it seems to take forever to get there, especially when you know it's going to take just as long to get warm again."

She glances at Dorothy. Is her aunt going to laugh at her? Lillian would. But Dorothy merely looks thoughtful.

"I like that idea." Dorothy puts knives and forks on the table. "When the snow flies, I feel like I'm going to be locked in an icy prison for six months. What about January and February? The hand is moving down then, but it's still as cold."

"Yes, but we know spring is coming and there's more light. And once March arrives, the hands are really going downhill, and they rush into June." She demonstrates with the stirring spoon and tomato sauce splashes across the floor. "Oops, sorry!"

Dorothy brings a floor rag in from the little porch and hands it to her. "Spring does pass quickly. Teachers have too many things to do then. Farmers, as well, I suppose."

Callie mops up the sauce, marveling because her aunt hasn't told her she's careless or clumsy. She doesn't seem at all like Lillian's sister.

"Then in July and August, the world swings at the bottom of the circle, sunning itself in the heat of summer. The days feel sort of lazy. You forget about winter and think summer will go on and on."

"Reminds me of lying in a hammock," Dorothy says. "But the longest day of the year is in June. Don't you think about the changes that come in July and August?"

"No, the weather's too nice. I never notice the hands climbing up to fall until it gets cold at nights. Maybe the first night in September that it freezes. Then I notice everything has slowed down. The plants are dying, and the sun takes longer every day to get out of bed."

"Do stop! You're making me shiver." Dorothy holds her hands over the heat of the stove again.

Callie is making herself shiver. The days are getting shorter and soon she'll have to light the lantern and brave the monsters when she goes to the outhouse at night. "September is when I start wishing I'd done more things during summer; stayed up later, made the days stretch out as long as I could."

Soon the first snow flurry will sift down out of a cold, gray October day. Parka, boots, mitts, socks and scarves, darkness until nine or ten in the morning and the feeling that spring and new growth will never come again.

"I like the way you imagine the year," Dorothy says, "but let's not talk about winter coming. I'm going to miss Dag when he can't get home for weekends."

Dag is living in the high school dormitory in Fort St. John, where she could be, too, if Lillian weren't so mean. He'd come back from Medicine Hat and out to the farm just long enough to pack up his clothes and say a polite hello and goodbye to Lillian and Lewis and herself. Dorothy and Kjell may miss him, but she doesn't.

Dorothy says, "Goodness, it's past noon. Go tell your mother dinner's ready and see if you can round up Lewis and Russell."

She hurries home, flushed with pleasure. Dorothy is so nice to be with, almost as good as Peter. Too bad she can't live with the Rasmussens — when Dag isn't around. The thought of Kjell brings a faint wash of guilt, slowing her steps. He said Dorothy would be upset if she knew about the touching. She doesn't want to make Dorothy unhappy, so maybe they shouldn't do that anymore. But…

"For heaven's sake, stop dreaming and get in here!" Lillian's no-nonsense voice scrapes her ears. "I need you to help me get these jars out so I can do the next batch."

At five o'clock, Callie takes the last armload of jars to the cellar. The sealers of meat look as innocent as if they'd been on the shelves since last fall's hunting season. If the game warden shows up, she hopes he won't come down here and find the jars still warm.

Supper is quiet, except for the rumble of the truck when Kjell gets home. In the front room, when Lewis lights his pipe and Russell his cigarette, Russell says, "You take a good look at the Fargo lately?"

Lewis tosses the burnt match in his ashtray. "Kjell's been running it the last week or so."

"One of the boards is cracked. On the right-hand side of the box, near the bottom.

From the inside, like somebody hit it with a sledgehammer."

Lewis sits up straight, anger brewing in his face. "How the hell did that happen?"

"I talked to Kjell about it." Russell takes a deep drag on his cigarette. "A full gas barrel got away from him when he was loading it. Banged into the side of the box."

"Hell and damnation!" Lewis is on his feet, stomping around. "Why didn't the lazy bugger fix it? A full load of wheat in the box could bust that board wide open."

Callie shrinks into her corner of the couch. It's scary when Lewis gets mad.

"Yeah, half your wheat could be on the highway between here and Dawson Creek."

Lewis opens the airtight heater, empties the ashes from his pipe into it and bangs the lid down. "You tell him to fix it?"

"I mentioned it. Guess he hasn't got around to doing anything about it yet."

"We better take a look."

Russell follows him toward the back door. "You got a piece of lumber that would fit? Could have the job done in half an hour." The screen door bangs shut behind them.

She decides to stay in the house, safe from the buzz of angry words. Kjell isn't lazy, not really. But it's true he's not responsible.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Callie crosses her fingers as she drops her assignments into the post office in Millburn. If she can't be a hero by shooting deer and providing the family with meat for the winter, at least she can get As on her schoolwork.

Mrs. Weyburn is a witch again; black dress, black stockings, and no teeth. No answering smile, either, as she hands over the mail. It must be awful to have no teeth. How does the woman manage to eat anything? Callie thinks of the eggs and toast and crisp bacon she had for breakfast and a swell of sympathy wipes out the witch image.

While Lewis settles the long-standing grocery account with George and picks up a few things for Lillian, Callie sits in the truck and rips open her letter from Peter.

Dear Callie: Sorry I haven't written sooner, but I've been busy trying to make a few extra bucks before school starts. When are you going to send me your story? You have a lot of imagination, so I'm sure it will be good.

He goes on to talk about his part-time job and the long walks he takes through the city. She wishes she'd finished the story when he was still at home, then they could have talked about it. She wishes even more that her Pink Ink drawings had reached him before he wrote this letter — he might have been able to tell her its real name and whether the fruit is good to eat.

Lewis's empty teacup clatters as he puts it on the saucer. "Well, kid, how about going after some prairie chicken this afternoon?"

"Good idea!" Lillian pours hot water into the dish pan and swirls the soap flakes around. "We can have them fried on Sunday."

It's true they'd be delicious after stuffing themselves with wheat and oats spilled in the fields, but she doesn't really want to kill them. It's not upsetting if the bird dies instantly, but she feels horrible if it's only wounded. Lillian will make a fuss if she doesn't go, though.

She gets the light .410 shotgun, fills her pocket with shells and heads toward the straw stack across the creek. The mid-September sun is mellow, the fallen leaves crunching under her feet. It might be the last good day this fall for sky dreams; cumulus clouds forming above the jack pine ridge promise cloud fire at sunset, too.

As she starts up the incline from the bridge, a flock of prairie chickens flies low overhead, the beat of their wings like a sudden rush of wind. They land beside the straw stack. No time now to think about sky dreams. She loads the gun and creeps to the top of the bank where she can rest her elbows on the ground and fire from a semi-prone position.

The speckled brown grouse are feeding close together. Through the gun sights, one of them looks like Lillian's graying head. Callie pulls the trigger. The stock recoils against her shoulder, the shot echoing across the valley.

The flock rises, wings thudding in the crisp air, but two birds remain. One is still, the other flutters with a broken wing.

Hell and damnation! Now she'll have to get close enough to make sure the next shot

kills it. Lewis would be angry if he knew she was using another shell; he'd wring the bird's neck. But she can't bring herself to do that. She ejects the used casing and reloads, wrinkling her nose at the hot, acrid smell of the exploded shell.

She moves closer and stands still, holding her breath. When the grouse stops struggling for a second, she fires again. The bird jerks once and flops.

She walks onto the mulched soil of the field. The stubble Lewis disked into the earth in August is already sweetening it for next year's seed. She hopes the prairie chickens had lots of babies last spring, that they haven't been sacrificed to dinner without leaving something of themselves behind.

One is on its back, snowy white breast and belly facing upward. She touches the downy feathers, riffling them with her fingers. It's sad that something so beautiful has to die. She reminds herself it would die anyway. Timber wolves, coyotes, foxes, other shotguns. The bird might die of the cold, come winter. Still.

Two hours later, six birds dangling from her hand, she walks into the kitchen where Lillian is rolling out pastry. The fresh scent of McIntosh apples fills the room.

"You did very well," Lillian says. "After you've cleaned the gun, you can take two birds over to Dot."

Kjell can't be home because the red pickup is gone. If Dorothy went with him, she can leave the birds on their kitchen table.

It's a surprise when Kjell answers her knock. Dorothy must have taken the truck, which means he's alone in the house. Her stomach flutters at the thought of his hands touching her. "Mom said I was to give you these."

"Very nice of her. Bring them in and put them on the counter." His hands are black with grease and engine parts are spread out on the wooden table under the porch window.

"How come you're not working in the shop?"

He wipes his hands on a rag. "Last week I left your Dad's crescent wrench outside and it got rained on. He wasn't very happy about it getting rusty."

That would upset Lewis for sure. He's big on taking care of tools. It's a good thing she didn't tell him about Kjell leaving the pasture gate open. Anyway, the shop is Lewis's private territory. Lillian acts like the entire world is her private territory.

"Stay for a while," Kjell says. "I'm in the mood to beat the pants off you at crib." He pours hot water into the basin and scrubs his hands. "When did your father shoot those birds? I thought he was disking today."

"I shot them."

"I didn't think a nice girl like you would kill birds."

Guilt makes her abrupt. "What difference does it make if I'm a girl? Don't you go hunting?"

He hangs up the towel, face somber. "No. Not since the war."

Lewis was in the first World War, but he still goes hunting. Every man she knows hunts deer or moose or birds; Kjell won't fit in if he doesn't do it, too. The other men will think he's a weakling. "I don't like killing but I think it's okay for food."

"Maybe so." He clears off the kitchen table, sets up the crib board and shuffles the cards.

By the end of an hour, she's beaten him two out of three games. Winning is fun but the best part is being close to him, watching his fingers caress the cards, watching how the fine hair on his arms reflects the light.

He says, "You're too damn good, you know that? I think you ought to have a reward. Come and sit on my lap, little daughter." He takes her hand and pulls her to him.

She sits on his lap, puts her head on his shoulder and wills him to hold her close and soothe her back. Wills his arms to tell her that he likes her, that his anger in the oat field has dissipated, that he doesn't mind if she kills birds. She rubs her face against his denim shirt, inhaling the faint odors of grease and tobacco.

He gives her a too brief hug, then holds her away so his hands can slide under her shirt and work their magic on her nipples. His hands are alive, the skin a little rough, and her nerve ends tingle, heat radiating from the center of her body. She closes her eyes, wanting to float mindlessly in that swirling sensation, to let him take control and do whatever he wants.

But if he does, she'll be like a leaf floating in the creek, helpless against the current. Her throat closes up and her chest tightens. She pulls away, gets to her feet, and goes to the kitchen counter.

"What's the matter?"

She takes a cup of water from the bucket on the counter while her mind scrambles for words.

"I don't know what we're doing. All I know is you said it would upset Dorothy and I don't want to do that." She puts the cup down, so he won't notice her shaking hands.

Kjell lights a cigarette and leans forward, resting his elbows on the table. "We're doing what married people do. The cuddling before having sex."

The image of Thunder covering Silver fills her mind. "Is that the same thing horses do? The thing that makes a mare have a foal?"

"Yeah. Except we haven't got to that part yet."

What would it be like to have a man's pee thing inside her? But she doesn't want to have a baby.

"Is that what you and Dorothy do in bed?"

"And other places."

Things she's read in books come back to her. In *Mythology*, Zeus is always falling in love with beautiful women and making Hera jealous. "You're not supposed to do that with anybody but your wife, are you?"

"What the hell do you think's going to happen if you sit on my lap?" He scowls and blows smoke at the ceiling.

"But you told me to!"

"You liked it, didn't you? So did I."

She hesitates. The touching is wrong. But it feels so good and, if she refuses, he might be angry again. She walks toward him, and he butts his cigarette, smiling.

There's a rap at the back door and the creak of the screen door opening.

She slides onto her chair, heart thudding, blood burning her cheeks. Kjell picks up the cards and starts dealing a new hand.

"Where's Dot?" Lillian walks to the table.

"She went for groceries."

What if she'd been on Kjell's lap when Lillian came in? Her hands are shaking so much she hides them between her legs. If Lillian finds out what she and Kjell were doing, there'll be hell to pay. Boiling red rivers of anger.

"I want you home," Lillian says to her. "I've got better things for you to do than fritter

away your time playing cards."

Peeling potatoes. Fetching things from the cellar. Familiar territory. She looks at Kjell as she gets up. "I'll let you beat me the next time."

"Don't be rude," Lillian says. And, with that special smile she always has for Kjell, "I apologize for her."

Callie's body follows her mother, but her mind drifts back to the stubbled field, back to the agony of the wounded prairie chicken, struggling to fly.

If you do something wrong and hide it, is that telling a lie? Or is it only a lie if somebody asks you a direct question and you give them the wrong answer?

After supper, Dorothy pops her head in the door and invites them to her house to play cards.

"I'd enjoy that," Lillian says. "Are you coming, Lewis?"

Callie is surprised when he says yes and slips his pipe and tobacco pouch into his overall pocket. Usually, he stays home and reads.

"I have to catch up on my lessons," Callie says. She doesn't want to be around Kjell with everyone else there. Something might show on her face.

"Oh, that's too bad," Dorothy says.

Knowing Dorothy cares makes her feel good, but the feeling is soured with guilt over Kjell and the touching.

"It's about time the adults had an evening to themselves," Lillian says. "Get on with it, Callie, and don't stay up past your bedtime. We might be late."

When they've gone, Callie works on finishing the fairy story so she can mail it to Peter.

When she's done it's still light enough to hide the story in the loft and visit the kittens. In the dusk, perched on a sweet-smelling sheaf of oats, she feeds them bits of chicken taken from her supper plate when Lillian wasn't looking.

The weak kitten has caught up to the others, his white feet the only difference from the other gray one. They're all strong and agile, fearlessly climbing up and down the ladder the way she wishes she could, and wrestling in the straw, little tails straight up and waving like flags in a breeze. She's named the tortoise-shell Goldenrod, the gray one with the white feet Buttercup, and the other Bluebell. Brief, brilliant blooms. She hadn't wanted to name them; it will make their death even sadder. But every living creature needs its own name.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Callie straightens up from picking potatoes. The air smells like snow but it's only the third week of September and if snow comes, it will melt. But winter is closing in around her; it's freezing at night now. Dark clouds loom overhead, and an icy breeze ruffles her hair.

Lewis and Russell are digging up the potatoes and spreading them out. The pale, dirt-streaked globes look naked and cold, shivering on the black earth. She and Kjell are lugging them to the house.

"Kjell? It'll take two of us to carry this tub." It's fun to work with him. She's glad Dag didn't come home for the weekend; then he'd be helping, not her. If Kjell were her husband, they'd work together all the time.

Startled by the thought, she turns away so he can't see her face. Kjell could never be her husband. Unless Dorothy died. She shivers.

Kjell tries to heft the wash tub by himself. "You're right. Damn thing weighs a ton."

They grasp the handles on opposite sides and trudge toward the house. Marriage is teamwork, doing things and having fun together, like Russell and Rita. Why isn't Dorothy lugging spuds instead of working in the house?

"Stop!" Her arm feels as though it's being pulled out of its socket. "I have to rest a minute."

"I can get Russell to help with this."

"No, no! I want to do it. I'm fine." They maneuver the tub across the plank bridge over the spring before her screaming muscles force her to stop again. She's stopped growing, but surely she'll get stronger.

The last haul up the short slope to the cellar window is the hardest. This morning Lewis pried the window off so they can dump potatoes right into the bin, rather than lug them through the house. She helps Kjell tip the tub and potatoes thunder into the bin below; more food stored up against the long, cold winter ahead. Last week she'd spent a morning picking two big pails of rose hips and now a dozen jars of rose hip jelly have been added to the crowded shelves.

She's aware of Kjell every step of the way as they walk back to the garden, his quick smile, the lazy swing of his arms, the way he turns his head so he can look at her with his good eye. The easy way he stands and smokes a cigarette with Russell when they take a rest. She bends again to pick up potatoes and toss them in the tub.

She's making supper for Kjell. He likes pork chops, spread with brown sugar and mustard, and baked in the oven. Mashed potatoes and a vegetable will be good with those. In the cellar are rows and rows of jars; beets, green beans, and peas that she canned in the summer. No, not beets, she won't grow beets. It will be green beans. And chocolate cake for dessert.

He hugs her when he comes in from the field and again after he's washed and changed. After supper, when he dries dishes, he says, "You're a wonderful cook. The best!"

And always, at the end of day, he settles into his big comfy chair and pulls her into his lap. He holds and hugs her, touches her until she melts against him. Then, hand in hand, they go into the bedroom.

She replays the fantasy over and over, but it always stops when they walk into the bedroom. They'd take their clothes off but she's not sure how people go about doing the rest of it. And anyway, the best part of the fantasy is when she's sitting on his lap being cuddled.

By noon the digging is done. Her back aches and her fingers feel like they're freezing.

They eat in the front room; seven people won't fit around the kitchen table. She gets a corner between Russell and Rita. It's hard to keep her elbows tucked in when she's mashing boiled potatoes into the gravy from chicken stew.

She sneaks glances at Dorothy while the conversation hums over her head. Dorothy is wonderful but Kjell should have a wife who knows about farming. She could be a better partner for him than Dorothy. She could teach him all the things he needs to learn, how to build a new granary, how to measure the angle for the rafters, how to make the floor level. He'd gaze at her in admiration and tell her he was the luckiest man in the world.

"Callie, wake up!" Lillian is clearing plates away. "I told you to get the cream and sugar."

"Bring another ashtray while you're at it," Russell says, lighting up.

"Bring your own ashtray!" Callie scrapes her chair back. "I'm not your slave."

"Callie! Don't speak to your brother that way."

She escapes to the kitchen, tears stinging her eyes, and gets the cream pitcher out of the cupboard.

Russell is there when she turns around. "What's the matter, kid?"

"I'm sick of everybody telling me what to do! All day long, it's 'Callie, do this, Callie, do that'."

"Sounds like it's time you went to town for school."

"She says I'm too young for the dormitory."

"You could stay with the Harrises."

"Putting up with Cathleen's two brats would be worse than staying here."

"Well, I guess you have to pick your own poison."

Lillian marches in, carrying a load of dirty plates. "You're not talking about my food, I hope." The way she smiles at Russell says she's fishing for a compliment.

"Not in a million years, Ma," Russell says, punching her in the shoulder. "Best chicken stew I ever ate."

Russell soft-soaps Lillian like she was going to buy farm machinery from him.

"Get away with you!" Lillian pulls the perking coffee to the side of the stove. "Callie, go down cellar and bring up a tin of canned milk. We're out of real cream."

She's tempted to stay in the cellar, but it wouldn't do any good. Somebody would chase after her and want to know what she was doing and why. And then tell her she couldn't.

She hands the tin to Lillian, who uses a can opener to make two holes in the top.

Russell leans in the doorway, grinning, the smoke from the cigarette between his fingers drifting across the room.

"No tits to pull, no tail to switch,
Just punch a hole in the son of a bitch!"

"Russell! There's no need to use language like that." Lillian is trying to frown but it's obvious she'd rather laugh. Russell can get away with anything.

After dinner Lillian says, "You get on with your schoolwork. Rita and Dot will help me tidy up."

Callie opens her geography text, but the words keep blurring. Her idea about teaching Kjell how to farm is wrong. Building granaries is only one part of farming, and not the important part either.

She can teach him to… What? Shoot prairie chicken? But he doesn't want to do that. And he already knows how to fix machinery and engines; he's a mechanic.

All she knows is how to fill the gas tank on the McCormick Deering. You have to put oil in, too, and grease moving parts. You have to know how machines work and what to do when things break or go wrong. Learn how to weld, how to clean a carburetor.

Outside the wind is picking up, seeping in around the window frame, raising goose bumps on her arms. The thing is, she's not interested in how trucks and tractors work, only in driving them.

Farmers have to know about soil, and which crops to plant. She'll need college for that because the men she's listened to have different ideas. When Russell was still at home, he and Lewis argued all the time about which crops were best and how to look after the land.

Kjell won't want to know how to cook and make beds and put in a vegetable garden; that's what women do. She knows enough to get by but the thought of spending her life doing what women do leaches the light out of everything.

Rory Calhoun smiles down at her from the wall, and she realizes what was wrong with the Kjell fantasy. She was cooking and cleaning for him. With Rory, she spends the day on horseback, helping him run the ranch. But every couple she knows lives the way Kjell and Dorothy do, the way Lillian says men and women are supposed to live.

A tear falls on her geography book. Why should she do things she hates because of what other people think? What she wants most is to study plants. Beautiful, fascinating, complicated plants. But easy to understand because nature is so orderly. She wants to farm, too, have her own piece of land, something she can put a fence around and walk on and know it will be hers forever.

She closes the book, yearning for the silence and emptiness of the hills.

As she walks out, Lillian says, "Where are you going?"

"None of your business." She makes her voice light and teasing. If she said it the way she really means it, Lillian would kill her.

"Oh." Lillian smiles. "Put a coat on, it's not summer any longer. And take a roll of toilet paper with you."

At the door, she remembers that Limpy often turns up at this time of day, looking for handouts. "Where's Limpy, Mom? I haven't seen him since yesterday."

Lillian looks uncomfortable. "You had him for dinner."

The residual flavor of chicken stew in her mouth turns sour and she swallows hard. Only weeks ago, he was a downy, yellow chick, nestled asleep in her hands. It doesn't matter about the other roosters or the hens getting too old to produce eggs; they're raised to be killed and eaten. But Limpy was special. Like a little kid, he'd trusted his people to look after him. Instead, Lillian killed him.

She lets the door bang as she goes out, lets the tears slide down her cheeks. There's no

point saying anything. It's Lillian's house, not hers. Lewis's farm, not hers. Nobody gives a damn what she thinks or wants. She has no say in anything.

In the outhouse, she wipes her face with a piece of toilet paper and swallows her sobs. The tears aren't so much because Limpy was killed — Lillian never once backed down on that — but because nobody thought it was important enough to tell her. If she'd known, she wouldn't have eaten any part of that chicken stew.

"Jake! Skipper!" The dogs come running and dance around her. "Let's go look for rabbits."

A mile down the trail it's almost like being in the wilderness. The only sign of civilization is the black sod of Kjell's field on the western slope. She pretends it's been abandoned, that the poplars and aspens are growing again. She's the only person in the whole long valley.

The wind is cold and the sky leaden now; likely there'll be a snow flurry tonight. But the air is clean and sharp, washing through her mind like a stream of icy water, sweeping away twisted thoughts and feelings. Herron Creek, silent here, wends its sluggish, brown way toward the lake. Dry poplar leaves rustle under her feet and she collects a few from the dry grass and puts them in her pocket.

She builds a one-room cabin and a barn for Silver among the trees near the lake. In the spring she plants potatoes and vegetables, in the fall she shoots prairie chicken and deer. The rest of the time she collects and studies plants or reads. There are no rules about eating or clothes or how to live. Once a month she rides to Millburn for groceries and mail. Nobody comes to visit until one day…

A long, mournful howl, rising to a high pitch and falling again, rolls across the valley from the jack pine ridge. Skipper whimpers, tucks his tail between his legs and races for home. Jake stands still, ears cocked, until the second howl reverberates against the hills, then he too turns tail and runs.

Wolves. Timber wolves down from the foothills early. It's going to be a long, cold winter.

In the morning, a fine skiff of snow whitens the roofs and frosts the dead brown grass. The air is thin, the sun subdued behind a high overcast of cloud.

Lillian pours a second cup of coffee for Lewis. "I'd like to go to church this morning. You promised last spring that we'd go in the summer, but we never did."

He lights his pipe, sucking at the stem and blowing out wisps of smoke until the match has burned to a stub. Half his coffee is gone before he says, "All right. We had too damn much work to do this summer."

Good. She can have the house to herself for a few hours. Longer if Lillian talks him into going visiting.

Lillian begins clearing the table. "Callie, go get tidied up and put on a skirt and blouse."

"No."

She doesn't know how that word got out of her mouth and all of a sudden she doesn't care.

"How dare you speak to me like that!" Lillian's face is mottled, her eyes cold.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. But I don't want to go to church."

"Well, you should want to go. You were confirmed in July; you belong to the church."

A weariness settles on her, and she looks down at her empty coffee cup. She should have fought back when Lillian insisted that she be confirmed but it seemed unthinkable then. It's still frightening. But she is not going to set foot in church again. There have been too many lies.

"I don't feel like going."

"Are you ill?"

"No. I just want to be left alone."

Lillian stares, then shakes her head. "If you prefer being here alone rather than go to a church service and talk with people, then something is very wrong with you."

Lewis shoves his chair back, banging the legs against the bottom step of the attic stairs, and gives Lillian a dark look.

Lillian's cup clatters into its saucer and the color in her cheeks fades.

Lewis says, "Hurry up and get your glad rags on. I'll gas up the truck." He puts on his battered old felt hat and clomps out the door, slamming it behind him.

When they're gone, she slips into a heavy jacket and walks up to the southeast corner of the pasture. The cold air tastes of winter but the sun is shining now. Callie runs to the fence, places one hand on top of a fence post and vaults over the barbed wire. She stands on the other side, grinning.

She said 'no' to Lillian. And it worked.

Chapter Twenty-Five

October 16

Dear Diary: I ironed all my leaves between waxed paper the way Dorothy told me, so they won't dry out and crumble. Two Axe said it was a waste of money. She's going to Fort St. John with Dorothy and Lewis today; a big storm is coming. If it does, we won't be able to get out with the truck again till spring. And Dag won't get home on weekends, which doesn't break my heart. When Lewis stops in Millburn to get the mail, I hope there's a letter from Peter about Pink Ink.

She puts the diary back in her closet. She's no longer afraid there won't be enough space to write everything. The way things are going, she'll have pages left over at the end of the year.

"Callie, don't let the fires go out." Lillian is wearing her green coat with the fur collar. "There's cold chicken in the shed for your dinner. And don't forget to feed and water the chickens."

Callie do, Callie don't. Anybody'd think she was six years old instead of nearly grown up.

"I'll remember."

"Well, mind that you do. We should be back the middle of the afternoon."

As the Fargo's tires squeak and crunch over the three-inch layer of snow and ice on the road, she waves goodbye from the back doorstep, gives Jake a pat on the head and goes inside to check the fires.

The chickens can wait until she finishes her math assignment. She picks up her pen and looks at the first problem, but it's hard to concentrate. Kjell is at home next door, by himself. Like she is.

She's walking back from the chicken house, looking at the overcast sky and trying to judge whether or not it will snow before nightfall, when Kjell opens his back door. "Come on in and have some turkey soup with me."

Butterflies tickle her stomach. She shouldn't really do this. Suppose he touches her? It's wrong and not fair to Dorothy. But maybe he won't, maybe he just wants company and a game of crib.

Kjell ladles turkey soup from a pot into two bowls and puts out crackers and cheese. He's wearing a deep blue plaid shirt, with the sleeves rolled up, and jeans that ride low on his hips. She's never seen a man get dinner ready before, but he's doing a good job.

They eat in silence. She can't think of anything to say. Maybe Kjell can't either, or else he's busy with his own thoughts, like Lewis. It doesn't matter; the house is cozy, the soup is good, and Kjell is easy to be around, even if he doesn't say anything.

Afterward, he washes the dishes and puts them away. "I don't think we should let anyone know you've been over here today." His glance is serious. "You're supposed to be doing your schoolwork, isn't that right?"

"I guess so. What are you supposed to be doing?"

"Nothing. The machinery's greased and there's no more grain to haul." A slow smile

lights up his face and he lets his hand rest on her shoulder. "Farmers have a great life. We get to sit around all winter and play. Right?"

She's not sure about that; Lewis almost always finds work that needs doing. But the thought vanishes as Kjell's warm hand slides down her shoulder and strokes her bare arm. Her knees feel weak and she can hardly breathe.

"Aren't we going to play crib?" Her voice feels as if it's trembling.

His hand stops moving. "Yeah, I guess we should. I had a different game in mind, though."

She doesn't know what to say. She wants the touching game, too, but if she tells him, he might decide that's better than playing crib. As much as she likes his hands on her breasts, it feels safer to sit across the table from him and just think about the touching.

Kjell cuts the deck. She turns up the highest card and deals, her thoughts on his hands. They're resting on the table, light glinting on the tiny reddish hairs between the knuckles of each finger.

"Hey, misdeal!" He tosses his cards down. "You dealt me seven cards."

She gathers up the cards. "I'll deal again."

His hand closes around her wrist. "You don't really want to play cards, do you?"

Before she can tell him a white lie, the way she should, he gets up and pulls her to her feet, running his hands from her shoulders down over her breasts to her waist. Little chills ripple through her body. She couldn't move even if she wanted to.

He turns her around so that her back is to him and pulls her tight against his body. His hands slide under her shirt and cover her breasts, his breath hot on the back of her neck. As his thumbs describe circles around her nipples, she can feel something hard nudging her bottom, something that wasn't there a minute ago.

Is that what she thinks it is? But the heat waves rippling from her nipples to Down There leave no space in her head for questions. She leans her head back against his shoulder, closes her eyes, and moans.

He spins her around to face him and pushes her against the wall, knocking the breath out of her. He holds her there with one arm while he unbuttons her slacks. They slide down her legs, fall in a heap around her ankles. His face is different; neither eye seems quite focused, as though he doesn't see her even with the good one.

This isn't the Kjell she knows. This isn't the man who seems like a brother and a father all rolled into one.

She opens her mouth, sucking in air, trying to form the words that will bring back the gentle Kjell, the one that doesn't frighten her. But he presses his mouth against hers and she hears, over his stormy breathing, the sound of the zipper on his jeans.

There is something hard and round like a sausage between her legs, hot against the crotch of her panties.

She twists her head away, struggles against his arm, gasps, "Kjell, don't! I'm scared."

He goes rigid and the seconds crawl by, the only sound his breathing. Does she dare try to jerk away from him?

Kjell yanks his hand from her back and slams his fist into the wall. "Callie."

"What?" She can hardly get the word out.

"Listen to me. Don't ever let any man do this to you until you're old enough to be married. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

The sausage is gone and he's zipping his jeans. "Do up your clothes."

She does as he says, her thoughts whirling. At the kitchen counter Kjell drinks water straight from the dipper, then sits at the table. She stands still, feeling cold without his arms around her. What should she do now? She wants to go home, but that might make him angry.

"Sit down. We'll play a game of crib and then you have to leave." He deals the cards. "I'm going to give you some more advice. When you're old enough to go out with boys and neck with them, don't ever moan like that."

"Why? I couldn't help it."

"Because it drives a man nuts, that's why. I almost couldn't stop when you did that. And if I'd finished what I started, you might have ended up pregnant." He shakes his head, lights a cigarette, and expels the smoke in a gust of air. "What a hell of a situation that would be."

Pregnant. Getting big and round and fat, and then a baby. She doesn't want a baby. And Lillian angry, her flames consuming everything. A shudder racks her body. "Can I have a cigarette?"

"Sure." He hands her one, lights it for her. "You're too goddamn young to smoke, too. Anybody ever tell you that you're just like your mother?"

"I am not like her!"

"You're all woman and you haven't got a clue yet what that means."

He's talking in code again. She drags on the cigarette and the smoke burns her throat. Coughing, she wonders if he'll keep on touching her if she promises not to moan. But if it's wrong, she shouldn't want him to touch her. And why does he do it when he knows it isn't right?

He picks up his cards, looks at them, and slaps them back on the table. "Look, we have to quit this cuddling game. As of now. All right?"

The disappointment is sharp. So is the relief.

"And I'll tell you something else since it doesn't look like your folks are too good about explaining what's what. You're going to have boys swarming around you like bees to a honeypot in a couple of years. They'll want to lay you on your back and stick it to you and they won't give a damn if you get pregnant or get a disease."

She's never imagined being touched except by Kjell. And Rory Calhoun, but all he did was kiss and hug her.

"You gotta learn to fight, Callie, you gotta learn to say no." He stubs his cigarette and lights another one. "You don't want to get pregnant until you're old enough to take care of a kid and you have a man to look after you. So, when the young bucks start coming around, give 'em the old 'one, two.'" He raises his fists to demonstrate.

She knows what that means. Lewis taught her that 'one' is a punch to the gut and 'two' is a punch to the chin to finish off your opponent. And it worked fine with Dag.

"You reading me?" His look is fierce.

"Yes." She hopes it's a long time before she has to think about defending herself. Touching is a lot more complicated than she'd thought. And it seems dirty now, the way Lillian says 'dirty.'

"Kjell, what we almost did, what makes babies — is that called fucking?"

His mouth twists. "Yeah, but not by you. It's a bad word. Women don't use it."

"What is it called then?"

"Making love. Having sex."

Making love. In *Mythology*, women fall in love and have lovers, but those words don't seem to fit what Kjell was doing. What is love anyway? Is it having sex or how you feel about people? *Flowering Earth* says plants have sex without passion. She's wondered, every time she read the words, what that meant. Now maybe it makes sense.

He gathers up the cards and puts them away. "I'm not in the mood for crib. I think you'd better get on home."

She walks back to her house, parka open to the cold wind, her thoughts muddled and dark. One thing is clear, though, one thing that she regrets. She didn't get to see his pee thing.

She has to get paper and kindling and relight the fire in the kitchen stove. The house is cool but heats up fast after she's put more logs into the heater and opened the draft. On her second trip to the shed for wood she notices the plate of cold chicken. She'd better eat it, or Lillian will get nosy about what she had for dinner.

She works her way through a chicken sandwich and a pot of tea, watching the horses paw for grass on the pasture hill. Soon they'll be confined to the barn and the corral. Like she was confined by Kjell's arms. Partly because she wanted it, of course, just like the horses can be captured because they want the pail of oats she takes to them.

Her disappointment about the touching eases. If that's what men are like when they 'make love' she doesn't want it. And now she won't have to wonder what will happen next or worry that Dorothy will find out and hate her.

Kjell must like touching her body as much as she likes having it touched. It's exciting to think she might have power over someone. But it wasn't much power, or he wouldn't have sent her home.

Why had he been so rough? Lillian used to be like that, lashing out with her hand every time Callie did something bad. Lillian doesn't do that now, but Callie can feel her wanting to, can see her muscles tensing. It seems like they're both willing to hurt her to get what they want.

Human beings are so strange and cruel to one another; plants are much more civilized. They only hit back with thorns or poison when you try to hurt them.

She puts on her parka and goes to the barn to visit Martha and the kittens, wanting to play with them, lose herself in their simple lives. But they're not there. Out hunting, perhaps. It's getting so cold at night now and will be colder soon. She's been bringing food to them, but soon it won't be enough. She sits, shivering, in the loft, and tries to imagine being cold and hungry for months. For the first time, Lewis's words about it being kinder not to let an animal suffer seem true. If death is like sleep, she'd rather the kittens sleep than have to endure the coming winter.

She makes a side trip to the outhouse, then stops outside to look over the valley. True winter hasn't come yet; in the fields lumps of mud and sodden stubble poke through the snow. In the garden, frozen potato tops lie like abandoned rows of blackened bones.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The heavy snowfall predicted for mid-October did not arrive. Instead, a series of brief storms interspersed with cold, sunny days brought a mere six inches of dry powder. But, on Armistice Day, an icy, howling wind out of the north slants heavy snow down the valley. Callie and Lewis come back from morning chores with faces reddened by stinging needles of snow and eyes tearing from the cold.

Callie stares out at the driving snow, so thick that the half dozen poplars across the road seem like ghosts. Winter is closing in, forcing her into hibernation like the animals and plants. She turns away, looks at the books on her shelf. At least she can spend the winter learning the new words and facts in *Wild Flowers* and *Flowering Earth*.

At ten, Lillian turns on the radio for the Armistice Day speeches while Lewis sits puffing at his pipe. He looks calm, but Callie can feel his tension. After the sermon, by a minister who admits he didn't serve in the second World War, Lewis stomps around the front room.

"Stupid bastard doesn't know whether he's punched or bored. If they're going to talk about war, they should have somebody who was over there, who knows what hell is."

Lillian's hands twist together in her lap. "Sit down, Lewis. They're going to have the two-minute silence now."

"That won't bring back the poor buggers who died." During the silent tribute, he thumps down the cellar steps and comes back carrying a bottle of wheat wine.

Lillian hurries after him as he opens the door to the shed. "Lewis, that's no way to show respect. Lewis!"

But the only answer is the slam of the back door.

Half an hour later, on the pretext of going to the outhouse, Callie lowers her head into the storm and heads for the lean-to. Lewis is inside sitting on a nail keg, the open bottle in one hand, a slender shin bone in the other.

"Dad?"

"Get out. This is none of your affair."

She takes a shortcut across the spring to the outhouse, pondering the unfamiliar huskiness in his voice and feeling a tightness in her chest.

Under a brilliant sun and blue skies… No, she needs a new word to describe this pale blue sky. *Under aquamarine skies a thick, diamond-studded blanket of snow covers Herron Valley.* Maybe the whole world, for all she knows. The snow came down on and off for ten days, a north wind blowing the gullies full and packing the snow into dense drifts. The roads are impassable and could stay that way until spring. Etched on the windowpanes are crystal forests, blindingly bright in the cold light.

Lillian says from the doorway, "What are you doing?"

"Catching up with my diary."

"I can't imagine what you find to write about. Put it away and get on with your lessons."

Callie locks the diary, puts the key in her desk drawer and opens her geography text.

It's hard to concentrate, though, with Christmas less than five weeks away.

Soon her parcel from Eaton's will come. Work socks for Lewis and Kjell, cigarettes for Russell and Peter, scarves for Dorothy and Rita. Dag is getting a pair of mitts and Lillian a brooch. Last year Lillian complained that the Brown Betty tea pot was a present for the house, not her.

The fresh snow outside her window is like clean white paper. Soon that blank page will be marked with the trails and signs of animals, ragged hints of what they do each day. She puts on an extra pair of heavy socks, then moccasins, twining the laces around the flaps that cover her ankles.

Lillian is sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, doing the crossword puzzle in the Prairie Farmer.

"Mom, can I use your camera? It's a perfect day for taking pictures."

"All right, but mind you don't drop it."

Callie do, Callie don't. She takes the old box camera, held together with two rubber bands, out to the shed. Wool ski pants, scarf, parka, overshoes, mitts.

The snow creaks underfoot and the twenty below zero air nips at her lungs. The dogs at her heels, she walks past Kjell's house. When she's in bed, she touches her breasts the same way Kjell did. The skin feels smooth and creamy. Did it feel that way to him?

She and Kjell have played a lot of crib in the last month but never alone and the games are more fun now that she doesn't have to worry about what might happen. She still feels tense when she remembers what he said to her that last day and every now and then she catches him looking at her when he's supposed to be looking at the cards.

Climbing the hill is hard work; her feet keep sinking through the top crust of snow. It's worse for the dogs with their short legs. Jake leaps from spot to spot as if he had springs in his feet but little Skipper lets her break trail for him until they reach the pasture fence.

The valley is dazzling white, the evergreens on the western ridge frosted like cakes. The straw stack where she has sky dreams is a pure white mound, almost invisible against the snow-covered field behind. The buildings below are islands in a sea of snow, the only sign of life smoke rising from two chimneys in the still air. The valley is like a Christmas card, but better because it's hers.

She takes two pictures and tucks the camera back inside her parka. Christmas will be fun this year, with Kjell and Dorothy. Even Dag, if he can get home. Not that she cares about Dag, but books say that Christmas is a wonderful family time, everyone happy to be together. There are games waiting on the bottom shelf of the front room bookcase, too, Scrabble, Chinese Checkers, Snakes and Ladders.

She trudges back down the hill, the dogs running ahead. Tonight, she'll cut stars out of the gold paper Lillian saves from chocolates and pin them to the bedroom doorway curtains. If she starts acting excited about Christmas, Lillian and Lewis might get into the spirit of things, too. They probably won't but if they do, it could really be fun.

As she passes Kjell's house, Dorothy's cheerful voice calls, "Come along in, Callie. I've just made a fresh pot of coffee and I'm sure I can rustle up some cake."

Callie takes off her parka and boots in the shed while Dorothy pours coffee. "I took some pictures from the top of the hill. Everything is so pretty with the sun shining."

Kjell looks up from his book. "Not much to do out there, though."

"I have something you can do," Dorothy says. "You promised you'd look for our

Christmas decorations in those boxes we stored in the barn." She walks over and ruffles his hair. "Come on, lazybones."

"Slave driver!" He gives her a playful pat on the behind and goes to the shed to pull on his boots and coat.

After he's gone, Callie says, "He's not lazy, is he?"

"No, but he gets distracted by projects that look like more fun than work." Dorothy smiles. "You might say he's easily led."

She's never heard that said about a grown man. The idea that she led Kjell into doing wrong gives her a sharp pang of guilt. But it was always his idea to touch her. It's true she wanted him to, but all four times he made the first move.

"He worked really hard all summer."

"Of course, he did," Dorothy says, "he just has to be pointed in the right direction."

That sounds strange. Lewis would never put up with Lillian telling him what to do. And Lillian says the man is head of the family and makes all the decisions.

Wait a minute. Lillian doesn't give him directions in so many words, but she often gets what she wants. And Russell always asks Rita what she thinks and does what she wants. Maybe it's what he wants, too, because he never seems to get upset about it. "Does he mind you telling him what to do?"

"I only make suggestions. He usually decides on the right thing." Dorothy laughs and lights a cigarette, shreds of tobacco falling on her lap. "When you grow up, Callie, you'll learn that a woman can influence a man to do things he'd never think of by himself."

Maybe it was all Dorothy's idea to leave Medicine Hat and go farming. It's exciting to think about. Much better than Lillian's rule that a woman has to do whatever her husband wants. If a woman is strong the way a man is, she can make her own decisions and never have to give up her freedom. One thing for sure, she's going to be strong and become a botanist, no matter what Lillian says.

"Peter found out about Pink Ink, that plant with the red berries that I found in August. He says it's called strawberry blite and the berries are edible raw or cooked."

"That's wonderful! And is it used to make ink?"

"No, but Indians used it to make red dye. And you can eat the leaves, too, like spinach." Not that she's fond of spinach, but it's good to know she could use strawberry blite for food if she was living in the wilds. "I asked him for a plant book for Christmas, but maybe I should have asked for a magnifying glass instead."

Half an hour later she goes home. When she opens the door to the kitchen, Lillian is standing by the stove, glaring at her.

"You filthy slut!" Lillian's face is fiery, her eyes so full of fury that Callie shrinks against the door jamb.

What's happened now?

"How could you do those filthy things? You're disgusting!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't give me that nonsense! You know perfectly well what I'm talking about." Lillian's voice is harsh, biting.

Lewis is between the cellar door and the stove, cutting off Callie's escape route to her

bedroom. In spite of her shaking knees, she notices his face is white and grim, his cheek bones more prominent than usual.

"No, I don't."

Lillian waves a small red book in her face.

It's her diary! Her private, personal diary. She reaches for it, but Lillian yanks it away.

"It's all in here, in black and white, the terrible things you've done with that man." Lillian takes a step forward. "And those awful things you said about me."

"A diary is private, just like a letter!"

Lillian's fist is clenched, rising. "I know what 'Two Axe' means. I don't know how you can be so cruel and ungrateful after all the things I've done for you!"

Callie presses her back against the door. "You had no right to read my diary!" It's fury making her shake now. She can hardly speak.

Lillian throws the diary at her. "I have every right! And it's a good thing I did. You've disgraced this family."

Callie picks up the diary and gathers her strength. "There wasn't anything bad. Just a bit of cuddling."

"You lying little bitch!" Lillian spits the words out, flames of anger haloing her head. "It says right there, in your handwriting, 'He put his thing between my legs.' Everybody knows what that means."

"You never told me it was wrong to do that, so how am I supposed to know?"

"Don't try blaming it on me, you little slut! You should have known it was wrong. No decent woman likes sex. You should be ashamed of yourself."

"Why? Kjell said I was like a daughter to him. And, anyway, he didn't put his thing inside me."

"Be quiet! You're not going to get out of this by lying. You're to stay in this house unless I say otherwise. And you're never going near the Rasmussens again. Do you hear me?"

Callie looks at Lewis, hoping for help, but he just stares out the window, a strange, remote look on his face. She feels like the sun has gone away, like there's a cold Arctic wind blowing through her.

"But Kjell and Dorothy will think it's funny if I don't go over there to play crib. And what about Christmas?"

"Christmas! You never mind about Christmas. Just be grateful we're still willing to feed and house you after what you've done. You're not fit to go anywhere, so you'll stay in your room and study. And you'd better study hard because you'll never marry. No man wants used goods."

It's hard to breathe, hard to think.

Lewis pivots and marches into his bedroom. She can hear him fumbling around in the closet, but it's not until he walks back into the kitchen that she realizes he was loading the rifle.

Lillian's face goes gray. "Lewis, don't!"

"Stay out of this."

He stops in the shed to put on a coat, cap, and boots. Lillian stands in the doorway, her hands fluttering. "Don't do it! Don't say anything. I don't want Dot to know. My own shame is enough to bear."

He goes out and Callie can hear his footsteps crunching through the snow. She pushes

past Lillian, shoves her feet into her boots, and yanks her parka off its hook.

"You stay here!" Lillian yells, clutching at her. "I said you weren't to leave the house and I mean it."

Callie pulls loose and reaches for the door. It creaks a little in the cold.

A rifle shot cracks like thunder in the clear air and reverberates across the valley. The impact of the sound jars her body, echoes in her mind. She rushes out, leaving the door swinging on its hinges.

Sunlight glitters on the pure landscape. There is no movement; even the smoke from Kjell's chimney hangs in the air as though caught in a photograph. The valley Christmas card is unreal, frozen in time.

Lewis stands on the path to the hen house, the banked snow before him splattered with crimson. Behind him, Jake crouches, whimpering, tail tucked between his legs.

Callie races toward Lewis, her heart thundering, her breath catching in her throat. Has he shot Kjell? Or Dorothy? Terror makes her falter. Will he shoot her, too? But she has to know what he's done.

Now she can see a small reddish mound.

"Skipper!" she screams, "Skipper!" and runs faster.

Ahead of her, Kjell emerges from his back door and stares at the scene in front of the hen house. "Jesus Christ! What have you done to my dog?"

They reach Lewis at the same time. She flings herself down and puts her arms around the dog's limp body, hot tears running down her face and moistening the disheveled fur.

Lewis growls, "Your dog's a chicken killer."

"That's a goddam lie!" Kjell's voice sounds as though he'd be crying too, if he wasn't so mad.

"This is the second time I caught him in the hen house," Lewis says. "Only one thing to do with an animal like that."

"He's never killed a chicken in his life!"

Lewis tucks the rifle under his arm. "He killed one last fall. This time I got him first."

"You're lying!"

Kjell is right. If Skipper had ever killed a chicken, she'd know about it.

"You calling me a liar, you son of a bitch?"

The sound of anger is chilling, like ice. Yet, in her mind, flames shoot up, echoing the crackle of savage words.

Kjell has his legs apart, braced, as though he's going to throw a punch. "You're goddam right I am."

"Then get off my land and good riddance."

"Can't happen too soon for me. I don't want anything to do with a crazy old bastard that shoots dogs and plays with old bones. Can't work with you, anyway; everything's gotta be your way."

Behind her, she hears Dorothy. "Kjell? Kjell, what's going on?"

"Go back inside." Kjell bends down and takes the dog from Callie. He straightens, looks Lewis in the eye and walks back to his house, Skipper in his arms.

Numb, she follows the stranger with the rifle. He shot poor little Skippy, for no

reason at all. He's like a creek bursting its banks and wrecking everything in its path. Too frightened to speak, she watches him take his boots off, his face lined and tired, and it comes to her. Lewis is mad at Kjell. He couldn't shoot Kjell, so he shot Skippy instead.

It's all her fault. If she hadn't let Kjell touch her, if she hadn't written about it in the diary, Skipper would still be alive. Fresh tears roll down her face as she hangs up the parka.

Lillian is at the door, looking at Lewis, wringing her hands. "What have you done?"

"I shot the bastard's dog."

"What did you say to him?"

Lewis looks at Lillian as though he'd like to shoot her, too. "I told him the dog killed chickens."

"Did you have a fight?"

"Hell and damnation, woman, what do you think? I told him to get off my land."

Lillian's voice is ragged. "But they can't get out. They won't be able to get out until spring."

"Then we'll have to live with the situation." Lewis gets the steel rod with the oily cloth on the end and cleans the rifle. "I don't want you talking to Dorothy. That will just muddy the waters."

"But she's my sister."

He looks at her, his eyes hard as the steel in his hand.

She turns on Callie. "You mind what I told you. You're not going over to that house and you're not to speak to any of them. Now get to your room and stop sniveling."

Callie sits at her table and wipes her face dry on the sleeve of her shirt. Her chest hurts and her body feels heavy, like a sack of lead shot. Kjell must hate her after what happened to Skipper.

But he doesn't know the real reason Lewis shot Skipper. Neither does Dorothy. They'll hate Lewis, not her. As long as nobody talks to anybody else, Dorothy will never know about the cuddling.

Lillian will stay mad at her forever. It's hard to tell if Lewis is mad at her or not. Why don't they listen to her? Why don't they believe her when she tells the truth?

Maybe she deserves this punishment. It's her fault Skipper is dead. She can only stand it if Dorothy never finds out, if Dorothy isn't mad at her, too.

The dried pearly everlasting on her table gleams in the sun. She breaks off one of the flower heads and crushes it in her hand, watching the tiny petals slide through her fingers, fall to the table. Plants are lucky. They're never afraid or sad or angry, they don't have to think about things or worry about what other plants do. They know only the sun and rain and wind, the air that feeds them, the earth that holds their roots.

She focuses on the diary lying in front of her. Now there is no one she can talk to. She tears the pages out, one at a time, methodically ripping them into eighths, then opens the airtight heater.

The scraps of paper whirl down into the flames.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

After breakfast, Lewis pushes his chair back from the kitchen table and looks at Callie. "I'm going up to the ridge for wood. I'll need you to help me."

"You might as well get a Christmas tree while you're there," Lillian says. "Christmas is only two weeks away."

What is she supposed to say to that? Oh, goody, goody, gumdrops? The hard, angry knot in her stomach tightens. Christmas is a bunch of baloney, just like religion.

Beside the workshop, Callie turns the handle on the grindstone while Lewis sharpens the axes. They hitch Dolly and Dinah to the sleigh that has double runners and collect from Lillian a lunch bag, paper, matches and a syrup pail.

They have to shovel drifted snow only twice on the trail past Kjell's land to the jack pine ridge. It's not too cold, thirty degrees below freezing, but the sky is overcast and gray, like the landscape inside her head. It won't snow, though; she can always smell a storm coming.

The sleigh runners squeak over the dry snow and the mares' breath turns to fog. She doesn't talk. Lillian and Lewis don't care what she says and don't believe her anyway. They just like telling her what to do. Or not to do. For the last three weeks she's said little except 'yes,' 'no,' 'please,' and 'thank you.' She does errands when Lillian asks, and studies. At night she reads *The Mushroom Handbook*, the two flower books and sometimes *Mythology* or a mystery. The second fairy story lies half done in her closet; she can't find the energy to even think about it.

The unspoken words in the house are so thick and heavy Callie wants to scream. Sometimes she even wishes Lillian would yell at her.

Lewis and Lillian talk after they go to bed, far more than usual, and often Callie falls asleep with their voices still humming in the other bedroom. Maybe Lewis is trying to soften Lillian's attitude. But Lillian isn't going to change, isn't ever going to treat her like a real person.

The kittens are gone, too. That happened sometime in the three weeks since Lillian found her diary. She doesn't want to know when or how, doesn't want to think about them dying. But Lewis hates killing, too; he would have made sure they didn't suffer.

Lewis knots the reins around a tree and starts felling a jack pine with his axe. The mares stand with heads down, stamping their feet now and again. There's nothing for her to do yet, so she and Jake follow rabbit and deer tracks while whiskey jacks scold them from branches overhead. When she comes back, Lewis has two jack pines, a spruce, and a poplar down and she uses the second axe to limb them.

At noon, Lewis hooks nose bags to the horses' bridles so they can munch oats. She tramps down a small circle of snow and builds a fire with paper and small dead branches from the felled trees. Lewis sets two forked sticks into the snow on either side of the fire and hangs the syrup can, packed with snow, on a long stick fitted into the forks. She makes tea when the water boils and thaws her sandwich over the steam. They sit on an old log, Jake facing them, looking from one to the other for his share.

When she's finished, she puts her crusts at the foot of a fir tree, backs off a few feet and waits. Two sleek gray jays, their white throats and penny-sized white crowns shining like new snow, glide down for their feast. After they have gone, she pours tea.

Lewis says, "Your mother means well, you know."

She stares at him, and he looks away. The knot in her gut unravels a little. Lewis isn't angry with her, or he wouldn't be making excuses for Lillian. So he knows Lillian is being unfair, knows she's always been unfair. But he's never done anything about it.

"She doesn't show it much."

He says nothing and her anger flares.

"Why didn't you stick up for me when I told the truth? Why didn't you tell her that I don't lie?"

He looks startled, then frowns. "No point talking to her once she's made up her mind about something."

"She'd listen to you! You're the boss in the family."

He gets up, walks back to the felled logs, and starts sawing them in long lengths to fit on the double runners of the sleigh. His movements are calm and deliberate.

She tosses what's left of her tea into the snow. It melts the surface crust and disappears, leaving a stain that looks like pee. Lewis always walks away. Always retreats behind the fence of silence. Keeps a poker tongue.

He loves her; she knows that. But not enough to help her when she's in trouble with Lillian. He says he hates lies, but he lied about why he shot Skipper. Skipper would never have killed a chicken.

Lewis's saw keeps up a steady rhythm and her heartbeat slows to normal. She still feels safer with him than anywhere else, except out in the valley, away from humans.

She looks west, into the trees. If she started walking, she'd hit the Alaska Highway after a mile or two. The snow isn't deep in the forest and there are game trails. She could thumb a ride to Fort St. John. Then what? She couldn't stay with Russell; his place is too small. No good going to the Harris's, either. Cathleen would send her back, somehow, after a dozen lectures.

Anyway, it's getting too late to try walking out. Darkness would fall before she reached the highway, and she might get lost.

Rory Calhoun gallops up on a black mare, leading a bay with a white blaze on her face.

"Come on, Callie. I've got food in the saddlebags and two rifles. We can be miles away by dark. In the mountains two days from now."

But Rory isn't going to come for her. Rory is a movie star, with a life she cannot begin to imagine. He doesn't know who she is or even that she exists.

The only way she can escape from Lillian is to run away. And it's possible; it just has to be done right so she doesn't have to come back.

She returns to limbing felled trees. In midafternoon, when the sun has dropped into the west, she helps Lewis load logs. He fastens the chains around the load, reaches for the front stake to climb on top, then stops.

"Nearly forgot. You mother wants a Christmas tree." He walks away again, axe in hand.

She stands beside Dolly and rubs the mare's velvety nose. Lewis didn't ask her to choose the tree, but that's nothing new. He always picks a nice one. And if he does it by himself, he won't have to talk, will he?

Across the valley, Herron's Nest lies silent under the long, slanting rays of the sun. Silent and cold. Callie stamps her feet to get the blood moving. Winter is not the best

time to go anywhere on foot. Spring will be better. She can start getting ready, though. Stash some clothes in the barn loft with her story; think about what kind of jobs she could get.

Lewis comes back dragging a six-foot spruce and they set off toward home. The silence is easier now that she knows he isn't angry with her. But nothing has changed. Not for him, anyway. He loves the land and farming more than anything else and he isn't going to let her problems upset his life. He's the boss all right — when it comes to things that interfere with what he wants.

Nothing has changed for her either. She will have to go on living life inside her head and say nothing.

Dawn brings a narrow streak of red sun-fire between looming gray clouds and white icy land, bare poplars on the hill silhouetted against it like knife blades. Callie and Lewis use the swede saw to cut logs into stove lengths. It's hard, monotonous work and the dark clouds weigh her down, sapping her strength.

Kjell's house is still except for smoke rising from the chimney. She's only seen him and Dorothy when one or the other tramps across the spring to the outhouse. What do they do inside all day?

The whole situation is a mess. It wouldn't have happened if Lillian trusted her to tell the truth. It's insulting to be thought a liar.

"Don't bend the saw," Lewis says. "Pull it straight. Once the cut starts going crooked, the saw will jam."

She tries to relax, to concentrate on doing it right.

Lewis pulls a new log toward the sawhorses. When they finish that one and yellow sawdust is thick on the snow at her feet, he says, "That's enough for this morning."

She moves toward the pile of old split wood, intending to take an armload into the house and he says, "You still feeling down in the mouth about your mother?"

"Yeah." Is he going to tell her again that Lillian means well? If so, he's wasting his time.

"Come to the barn with me."

She follows him into the ripe smell of manure and the faint warmth emanating from the animals. He leans one hand against the stanchion between Dolly's and Dinah's stalls.

"Look, she's trying her best. I don't hold with all her ideas about raising a family, but that's her department. You haven't done too bad, considering."

That's right; she's always had a roof over her head, food, and clothes. She has books, she's getting an education. But that doesn't seem like much when she has to fight so hard against Lillian trying to make her into somebody else. Somebody with no freedom to think for herself, no desire except to please Lillian.

"Why doesn't she believe me when I tell the truth?"

"She's bitter." He takes the pitchfork, clears away the mess behind Rosie and replaces it with fresh straw. "I guess you're old enough to be told why."

She feels old enough to be told anything.

He rests both hands on top of the pitchfork. "She had a big disappointment after she married me. She found out I was a jailbird."

The barn floor shifts beneath her feet. Lewis a jailbird? An ex-convict? So, when he said his family were all horse thieves, he wasn't teasing. No wonder Lillian is bitter, with her dreams of a genteel life and her terror of what other people think of her and her family.

"That shock you?" Lewis asks.

"Surprises me. But you couldn't have done anything that bad."

He smiles a little. "Depends on who you ask. Your mother never got over the shock."

"What did you do?"

"Lost my temper when I was nineteen and beat the bejesus out of my old man. He charged me with assault, and I went to jail for a year."

She imagines Lewis caged in a crowded jail, never alone with his own thoughts. "That must have been awful. Why did you do it?"

He leans the pitchfork against the wall. "He beat me damn near every week as far back as I can remember. I finally had enough."

She feels like that about Lillian sometimes, as though she can't take any more. But she wouldn't want to hit anybody, and she can't fight Lillian with words.

But why did he beat up Russell when he hated his own father doing it to him? Russell must have been right when he said Lewis has a really bad temper. In *Unnatural Death*, Lord Peter Wimsey said that one murder leads to another. Maybe it works the same way for violence.

"Your mother took it hard when I told her." He shakes his head. "Should have done it before we got hitched, but I didn't think it was important. I always worked and made an honest dollar, did my duty in the war, always treated her with respect. She didn't see it that way, though."

"I guess she's ashamed."

"She sets too much store by what people think but she'll never change." He gives her a long look. "You're more like me than her. You think for yourself, and you don't mind too much what anybody else says."

"I try not to. But she treats me like I don't have a brain in my head."

Lewis moves toward the door. "Well, you keep in mind what I just told you. And you better not let on you know about me being a jailbird; she'll just get riled up and take it out on both of us. Long as you know some of her picking at you is because she's mad at the world, not because you did anything, maybe you can put up with it easier."

As she walks back toward the house, she feels a surge of affection for him. At least he told her the secret of why Lillian gets mad at him. That doesn't make up for killing Skipper, but it helps.

She takes an armload of wood into the shed, strips off her outer clothing, and goes to her room. With her last envelope of marked assignments, there was a notice about an essay contest. The Peace District Cooperative Association wants essays from correspondence students about the advantages of the co-op system. They've sent tons of booklets and pamphlets.

She hadn't given the contest any serious thought when it came. Lewis is dead against socialism. He thinks Tommy Douglas and the CCF are naive and stupid and too idealistic for their own good. "Hell will freeze over," he says, "before socialism works." It's interesting to imagine the hot flames of hell being covered with ice. But if God doesn't exist, neither does hell.

She takes the two soiled menstruation rags from the paper bag in her closet out to the kitchen and rinses them in cold water. As she dumps the blood-stained water into the slop bucket, Lillian walks by.

"Oh," Lillian says, "you've started your period." She actually smiles. "That's good."

What's good about it? Her period came right on time, as usual, so what's the big deal? She takes the rinsed rags and puts them with the pile of dirty clothes in her closet.

Lewis won't like her praising co-ops but she's going to enter the contest anyway. He doesn't care what other people think, so why should she? Besides, the first prize is twenty-five dollars and the second is ten. She could do a lot with twenty-five dollars. Eaton's still has wool skirts with kick pleats, and she could get a magnifying glass. Or a bridle for Silver.

Maybe. The skirt and bridle don't mean much anymore. But she can decide later what to do with the money if she wins. Right now, all she wants is to prove she can do it.

When she sits down at her table to start an English essay, she looks up at the picture of Rory Calhoun for inspiration. His smile and the dancing light in his eyes always make her feel good.

But the magic is gone. Staring back at her from the wall is just a page torn from a movie magazine. His smile is phony now and his eyes aren't looking at her. She takes the picture down and puts it in the treasure box. But the Rory fantasies were good; she won't ever throw him away.

It's dark by four-thirty these days and Lewis does chores and forks out oats to the animals by lantern light. And in the morning, it's nine-thirty or ten before the sun rises over the pasture hill. The days are short and cold, the nights long and colder.

At nine in the evening Callie bundles up, lights the lantern and treks to the outhouse. The night seems darker than usual, the monsters lurking beyond the circle of dim light more eager to grab her. When she's through, the dropseat of her long johns buttoned and her ski pants fastened again, she sits down, trying to build up the courage to open the door and make a dash for the house.

Something crunches in the snow outside. Jake? No, it's too loud! And it's coming right toward the outhouse.

Oh, my God! What's out there? Her knees feel rubbery, and she can't breathe. The noise keeps getting louder.

And stops, right in front of the door. Just as she thinks she will die of terror, a low voice says, "Callie?"

It's not a monster, it's Dorothy!

She opens the door, and the pale lantern light shows Dorothy's face framed in rabbit fur. She's never in her life been so glad to see anyone.

"Do you want to come in? I'm through."

Dorothy pushes in beside her. "I want to tell you a few things so at least somebody knows what's happening, that's all." She latches the door, and they sit on the bench, the lantern at their feet.

Tears cloud Callie's eyes. "I'm sorry Lewis shot Skipper." She feels so guilty it's like she shot him herself.

"You call Lewis by his first name? Lillian wouldn't approve of that."

"Only in my head. I didn't mean to say it out loud."

"Well, I'm sorry, too. I thought we were going to make a go of it here, but your father's a difficult man. Even if he hadn't killed the dog, it would never have worked." Dorothy pauses. "Why haven't you been over to see us? You're not involved in this fight."

"Mom won't let me. She's says I'm not to go near your house or speak to you, ever."

"Lord above, she's turned into a bitter old woman!"

Of course she's bitter. She's got a daughter she doesn't want, a daughter who won't speak or act like a proper young woman. She can't put on a hat and white gloves and go have tea with nice ladies in the afternoon. And she has a jailbird for a husband.

But Dorothy doesn't know why Lillian is twice as bitter now. Callie hopes, chilly fingers crossed inside her mitts, that Dorothy never finds out.

"I'd come and visit but Kjell wouldn't like it and my first loyalty is to him. I'm not angry with Lillian but she'd side with Lewis, no matter what awful thing he did, because she thinks that's what a wife should do."

Lewis thinks so, too. But if Callie had a husband that killed dogs, she wouldn't side with him.

"Aren't you ever going to speak to each other again?"

"Oh, yes, some day. After we're settled in Medicine Hat again, I'll write to her."

Will Lillian ever tell Dorothy what started the row? The thought makes her stomach clench. But no, Lillian is ashamed of her. She wouldn't want anyone else to know that her daughter is 'used goods.'

"So you're really leaving?" The guilt is easing now she knows they would have left anyway.

"Kjell's going to walk to Millburn sometime next week and get a ride into Fort St. John on the mail truck. He'll put our land up for sale and go on to Medicine Hat. I'm sure he can get a job; garages are always looking for good mechanics. After spring breakup, he'll come and get me."

"That's a long walk! Seven miles in that heavy snow."

She realizes that the cold is seeping up from the hole and through her clothes, numbing her behind.

"He can't stay here, Callie. He's going out of his mind with nothing to do but brood."

If it wasn't for keeping her mind busy with schoolwork, she wouldn't be able to stand it, either. But Kjell is lucky; he has someplace to go and a way of earning a living.

"How are you going to manage for firewood?"

"Bless you, Kjell's leaving me well provided for. There's enough chopped wood stacked in the shed and beside the house to last me the winter. If it doesn't, I'll chop some myself. It wouldn't be the first time."

"How about food?"

"I have all I need except milk and eggs, and I can do without those. It's not likely Lewis will offer me any."

"I think it's awful that you're going. But I guess you have to." She can sneak a few eggs to Dorothy now and again without her parents finding out.

"We'll probably lose money on the land, never mind that Kjell's worked for nothing for half a year, but we can't stay here. What kind of a life would it be, living next door to neighbors who won't speak to you? And nobody else for miles around? No community

life at all?"

"Awful, I guess." What's even worse is that they're living on Lewis's land and using his water. She wouldn't want to be beholden to people who hated her.

"Well, there you are." Dorothy pats her hand. "Don't you worry about us. Nothing's really lost. We were happy enough before we came here, and we will be again."

Then what happened isn't such a disaster after all. "You know about Lewis's secret, don't you? About him being in jail?"

"Who told you? Lewis?" Dorothy sighs. "Yes, I know about it. Lillian wrote me when she found out, though I'm sure she regrets that now."

"Why wouldn't she want you to know?"

"Pride. She's ashamed of being married to a man who spent time in jail."

"Do you think it's important?"

"Under the circumstances, no. I might have done the same if my father had beaten me all my life. Lewis paid the price for his violence and got as far away from his family as he could when he was released. But Lillian heard about it just a few weeks after the wedding, when they were visiting his people in New Brunswick. She was in a strange country, with people she didn't know, and discovering she had a husband with a history of violence was a tremendous shock. She wouldn't have told me otherwise."

Lillian must have been really upset to tell her little sister about Lewis going to jail. "Can we talk like this again sometime?" She wants to hear Dorothy's voice and laughter as long as she can.

"I'll keep an eye out for you at night. Don't let Lillian get you down." Dorothy unlatches the door. "You go on ahead. As soon as you're inside, I'll go home."

She walks to the house, the lantern swinging in her hand, unafraid even when Jake leaps at her out of the darkness. It makes all the difference in the world having Dorothy back there watching.

It's a big relief to know Dorothy doesn't mind leaving, that she and Kjell will be happy in Medicine Hat. Callie reaches for the door. It's good to have some secrets. Ones that she isn't ever going to tell Lillian or Lewis.

An idea sparks in her mind as she takes off her boots. Did Lewis shoot Skipper because he was mad at Kjell for what he'd done to her? Or because it would start a fight, giving him an excuse to kick Kjell off the property?

She slams the back door shut and slides the big wooden bar across, shutting out all the hobgoblins.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

A week before Christmas, Callie helps Lewis hitch Dolly and Dinah to the cutter and they set off for Millburn across the sun-dazzled snow. As the mares plod past Kjell's house, their hooves kicking up little spurts of snow, Lewis says, "That lazy bugger just sits around the house doing nothing. I don't know how he can stand it."

She could tell him Kjell isn't there, but why should she? There's anger on Lewis's face every time he mentions Kjell or looks at the blue house. Anger means tight little knots that make your stomach hurt, buried words that burn in your throat. Lewis deserves to be punished for killing Skipper. She hopes he stays angry for a long time.

It's hard going for the horses until they're on the main road to Millburn where other sleds have pounded a trail in the snow. When they get to George's store, it's full of people buying special things for Christmas. Lewis says hello to some of them, but she doesn't feel like talking.

On the way back, the sky clouds over. It doesn't matter if a storm comes now; she's mailed a batch of lessons, as well as the letters Dorothy gave her in the outhouse last night, and got her parcel from Eaton's.

"What'll I do with the mail for the Rasmussens?" she asks as they drive into the yard.

"God damn it, what did you pick up their mail for? I'm not running a post office. If they want their mail, they can go get it themselves."

She waits for him to decide what he wants her to do. He wouldn't be mean enough to throw it out, would he?

"Put it on their doorstep."

That's all right. Dorothy will hear her boots creaking on the back step and know something was left for her.

Callie takes the parcel into her room, along with Christmas wrapping paper and ribbon. She pulls the curtain across her door as a sign she wants privacy — not that that would ever keep Lillian out — and tries to decide what to do with the presents she bought for the Rasmussens.

Her mother wouldn't want her to give them any gifts, but why should she care what Lillian wants? The Rasmussens are going to get their presents. Somehow. She feels no pleasure now in gifts for Lillian and Lewis but there's nothing else she can do with a pair of socks and a brooch.

She wraps and labels the gifts, just as she'd planned weeks and weeks ago. She'll have to hide the three for Kjell, Dorothy, and Dag and, tonight, smuggle them to Dorothy when she goes to the outhouse. Kjell won't get his until he comes back in April. Dag will have to wait, too; the snow is so deep he won't be able to come home for Christmas.

Lillian is still reading mail from England. "Your grandmother sent you a five-pound note for Christmas. That was very generous of her; five pounds is a lot of money."

"How much?"

"Ten dollars, perhaps fifteen. You'll have to write her a very nice letter, thanking her."

"I know. You tell me that every time."

"You keep a civil tongue in your head, young lady!" Lillian's mouth is turned down at the corners. "I'll put the money away for you, though you don't deserve it."

"It's my money. I want to keep it."

Lillian flings the five-pound note at her. "Suit yourself, but don't blame me if you lose it."

Callie puts it in her pocket. *She thinks I'd lose it just to spite her. She thinks I live and breathe just to spite her.*

Lillian shuffles her letters and cards into a pile and takes them into the front room. "I'm going to tack these cards to the wall. Some of them are so pretty. And hadn't you better get that tree decorated?"

"All right."

Lillian frowns. "You might show a little enthusiasm. The tree's there for your benefit. We certainly wouldn't bother having one if you weren't here."

It had taken Lewis only two minutes to chop it down and ten minutes to set it up in a pail of earth from the cellar. What's the point of having a Christmas tree just for her? How can you be a happy family all by yourself?

By the time she's wound silver rope around the tree, attached colored balls and flung icicles on the branches, it's getting dark outside. The spruce needles are fresh and spicy, but the tree will die soon, sacrificed for nothing.

Lillian lights the gas lamp and inspects the finished tree. "It's very pretty. I'd like to have candles on the branches the way we did at home but your father's afraid of setting the house on fire."

So, the tree is for Lillian, too. Surprise, surprise!

After a supper of bacon, johnnycake and syrup, Lillian says to Lewis, "How about a glass of rhubarb wine? It is Christmas Eve, after all."

"Don't mind if I do."

"Can I have one, too?" Callie asks. She's always allowed a sip or two on Christmas and New Year's.

"No, you may not." Lillian takes two glasses from the cupboard. "You can count yourself lucky that you get fed and clothed."

She should have known better than to ask. Should have known better than to break her own rule of 'speak when you're spoken to.'

Lewis holds his glass up to the light of the gas lamp before he takes the first sip. The wine is a lovely, clear, pale rose, but she can't remember what it tastes like.

After Lewis and Lillian listen to the news, they call Callie away from her book to play three-handed whist. Lillian complains about not getting good cards; Lewis is silent. The lamp hisses in the center of the table, dark shadows pooling in the corners of the room.

The house is warm and smells of bacon and burning spruce. The Christmas tree tinsel twinkles in the corner. Anyone looking in at the scene would think it was peaceful, a cozy winter evening for the McKenzie family.

But it isn't peaceful. It isn't home anymore, either. She's trapped in a Christmas card scene and no outsider could guess at the ugliness beneath the tinsel.

Christmas day starts off like any other. It's pitch black outside at seven in the morning and almost as dark in the house; the only light is the coal oil lamp on the kitchen table. She dresses in the shadows, shivering beside the airtight heater, washes her face, eats

oatmeal and toast. When the dishes are done, Lillian brews a fresh pot of coffee, pours a cup for each of them, and leads the way into the front room, carrying the lamp.

"Merry Christmas! Let's see what Santa brought. You hand out the gifts, Callie."

Playing Santa Claus has lost its appeal, but she might as well get it over with. She begins with her own gifts to Lillian and Lewis, and they thank her politely, putting them aside and waiting for the next.

Her aunts and uncles have been generous this year. There are three or four little gifts for Lillian and Lewis and half a dozen for herself. There's nothing from Dorothy and Kjell, of course.

The first present she opens is Peter's. It's a book about the birds of North America, with pictures of what they look like in both winter and summer. And there's a note from him.

"Sorry, I couldn't find the kind of flower book you wanted. I hope this will do as well."

Not quite, but it's a good present. Later she'll see if it explains the sounds each bird makes.

The odd-shaped parcel from her parents she keeps until last. It can't be shirts, though Lillian has made some for Lewis, and it's not a book.

"Open it up," Lillian says, "I want to get on with stuffing the chicken."

She tries to undo the paper so it can be saved but that doesn't work, and she finally rips it off in pieces.

A bridle! A bridle for Silver. Lewis has bought it for her because the crops were so good this year.

Or is it because he's trying to make up for the way Lillian treats her? Too late for that now.

"Thank you! It's exactly what I wanted." She caresses the stiff new leather, inhaling its scent, and runs her fingers over the smooth steel bit. Now maybe she has some hope of controlling the stubborn little mare.

"Don't thank me," Lillian says, "thank your father. It was his idea. Liars don't deserve presents."

Callie glances at Lewis. He knows she's not a liar. But Lillian won't let her enjoy the bridle without making her feel like she has to pay for it somehow.

"Can I go try it out on her?"

"Weather's too cold," Lewis says.

She checks the thermometer outside the kitchen window by the cold dawn light. Sixty-seven degrees below freezing. Hell and damnation, it *is* too cold. Well, if she can't, she can't. But it would have been a good chance to tap at Dorothy's kitchen window, which nobody can see from her own house, and say hello.

Lillian folds the wrapping paper, Lewis goes off to do his chores, and the day fades to ordinary routine. Callie watches from the front room window as the slanted rays from the rising sun turn the valley from gray shadows to sparkling white and listens to Silent Night on the radio. She might as well go finish her essay on co-ops.

They'll eat roast chicken tonight and the tree will be around another week, but Christmas is pretty much over. It's only in books, like *Little Women*, that Christmas is a friendly, happy time, full of loving, laughing families, joyful because they're together. What a lot of malarkey! All these songs and Christmas cards about peace and goodwill must have been written by the same kind of people that wrote the Bible. The kind of

people who want everyone to be good because they think if you're good everything works out okay.

It would have made more sense to eat roast chicken on December 21. The only thing she has to celebrate is the days getting longer. Before winter releases the earth from its icy prison and new green life makes the earth beautiful again, there is a long stretch of cold and darkness to be endured. But spring must come sometime.

Two days later she struggles awake to another heavy storm, small tight pellets of snow hissing against her bedroom window. The sky and the valley are blotted out, the whole world a kaleidoscope of driving snow. The edges of the room seem colder than usual and that's odd, because her body is burning up.

"Callie, get a move on." Lillian's voice sounds foggy, far away. Callie doesn't have the energy to answer.

She wakes again, groggy, to find Lillian shaking her. "Come on, lazybones, get up."

She struggles for words and coughs. "I don't feel good. My eyes hurt."

Lillian frowns and puts a hand on Callie's forehead. "You've got a fever. You'd better stay in bed."

Later Lillian comes back with a cup of hot, milky coffee, Lewis in her wake. "She's coughing and she's got the sniffles, so it's probably 'flu. I suppose she picked that up when you went to Millburn before Christmas."

Lewis looks down at her but says nothing. She wishes they'd go away. All she wants is to be left alone in her cocoon of blankets so she can sleep.

Three days pass and she's no better. The fever burns in her brain, turning seedling thoughts to ashes before they have a chance to grow. Whenever she drifts awake, snow is still falling. Sometimes the snow falls inside the room, but when she reaches for it, it isn't there. She tosses and turns, throwing the blankets off, and dreams about flying through the storm like an Amazon fairy, the cold wind cooling her fever, the cold flakes biting into her skin.

On the fourth morning, when Lillian brings a cup of hot milk, she peers at Callie's face.

"You've got red spots. Let me see the rest of you."

Lillian pulls down the blankets and Callie raises her pajama top. "Looks like measles to me." She takes the chamber pot away to dump and scald with boiling water.

Callie leans on one elbow to sip the milk and listens to Lillian and Lewis in the kitchen.

Lillian says, "I wish we could send for the doctor. Though I don't know what he'd be able to do for her."

"I couldn't even make it to the main road to Millburn with all this snow. It's too deep for the horses. If I can't get out, the doctor couldn't get in."

Do people die of measles? Is that why they want the doctor? Smoke from Lewis's pipe drifts into her room.

About the sixth day, she wonders if she actually is going to die. It's such a strange thought, death. No matter how hard she tries, she can't imagine the world without her in it. But everything else dies, so it might happen. She can't quite decide if she cares or not.

Will Lewis and Lillian feel bad if she dies? She imagines them burying her up in the southeast corner of the pasture and crying over her grave. Lillian will be sorry then that she didn't treat her better. Lewis might even be sorry he didn't stick up for her against Lillian. It's so sad watching herself be buried that her pillowcase is soaked with tears before she lapses into sleep again.

Lewis does a lot of pacing, back and forth, back and forth, into the living room, then the kitchen. Next day he comes into her room and gives her a silver fifty-cent piece and she cries again. He's never given her money before. She knows for sure now that she's going to die.

Is this happening because of what she did with Kjell? She didn't mean to do anything bad, and it didn't seem wrong in the beginning, when he pretended she was his daughter. If he said that just so she'd let him touch her, she'll never forgive him.

Maybe there is a God and she's being punished because she gets angry at Lillian instead of being grateful for her food and clothing.

What if she prayed to God to forgive her and make her better? He might exist, though she doesn't believe it, any more than she believes the Amazon fairies are real. Maybe if she pretended to believe in God, after a while He would become real. Then she could say truthfully that she believes and could pay attention to what the Bible says.

Living with Lillian would be a lot easier. Say yes to God and Lillian and stop thinking. Stop asking questions and be what Lillian wants. Give up on botany.

But she can't pray to a god she doesn't believe in just because she's scared she might die. That would be cheating. No, if she's going to die, she's going to die and that's all there is to it.

That night when the house is dark, she wakes, feeling chilly. Her fever is gone. Cold moonlight glitters on the snow and the stars are pinpoints of light in a blue-black sky. Down in the creek bottom, coyotes howl their sad song at the moon and, beneath her window, Jake howls in reply. Her brain feels as if everything has been burned out of it. There's nothing — no anger, no fear — only this moment of moonlight and coyotes singing, the coolness of her skin, the desire for more sleep.

Suppose she gave in to Lillian, then caught another disease, like scarlet fever, and really did die? She'd have wasted all that time on housework and doing things she hates instead of learning the truth about plants and life. Living like that would be the biggest lie in the world.

She closes her eyes, but she can still see the star-pricked blackness of the sky, the pale moon, the pale shadowy snow covering the valley. The sky and the earth are inside her head. And she's inside them, where she belongs. She's part of them, just like plants and animals. Nothing can take that away from her, not even death.

She burrows into the sheets and drifts toward sleep, lulled by Jake and the coyotes singing their winter song.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

In mid-January, a three-day chinook melts half the snow. Callie stands by the doghouse, snow boots undone, jacket open, face raised to the sun, breathing in sweet, warm air. This fleeting taste of spring makes her want to dance and turn somersaults, but she is too awkward. The joy will turn to pain, stinging like a squirt of lemon juice in the eye, if someone laughs at her.

The back door bangs and Lewis tramps off toward the workshop. Tucked in his arm is the bottle of parsnip wine Lillian opened the night before. He's not going to work then; he's going to spend time with the elk bones.

This isn't a good time to go in the house. Lillian's face will be dark and tight, her tongue ready to lash out at any human or animal within range.

Callie gives him twenty minutes to get settled, then cat-foots it to the lean-to. The door is open a few inches. She creeps closer, debating whether or not to go in.

He's humming to himself. She's never heard him do that before. The only words she can make out are 'dem bones, dem dry bones.' She can't see anything through the crack in the door except the almost completed elk skeleton.

She has a vague memory, floating almost out of reach, about a story in Ezekiel to do with bones. As she walks into the house, Lillian snaps, "What were you doing lollygagging outside? Get back in your room and do your lessons and don't give me any excuses."

It takes only five minutes to find the story.

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; it was full of bones.

And he led me round among them; and behold, there were very many upon the valley; and lo, they were very dry.

And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, thou knowest."

Again he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host.

Tears roll down her cheeks and she fights to draw breath into a chest so tight her ribs hurt. Hands shaking, she returns the Bible to its shelf, and struggles to stop the tears before Lillian catches her crying.

Lewis sees the bones as the millions of men who died in the War. He's sitting out

there with all those ghosts around him, full of sorrow because he can't put them back together, can't bring them to life again. Kjell was wrong when he said Lewis was crazy, playing with old bones. Lewis isn't crazy; he just hurts so much that he has to have bone dreams the same way she has to have sky dreams.

Nothing can bring those men back to life. Except the Earth giving birth to new life out of their blood. For a moment the great cycle, repeating itself for millions of years, is clear in her mind; thousands upon thousands of generations of plants, animals and humans dying and being born, the awful connectedness of life and death. But *Flowering Earth* says life always renews itself, no matter how much death destroys.

No wonder Lewis doesn't think her problems are very important. They aren't. Not compared to the pain of all those men wounded and dying.

The chinook's warm breath gives way to freezing easterly winds and the mercury in the thermometer drops sixty degrees overnight. Another four weeks slip by, the frost-ridden days much alike. At night the beds are chilly and the house is frigid when Lewis piles on kindling and logs at seven in the dark morning. Callie warms her clothes under the covers before she dresses. Even with two pairs of socks on, her feet shrink from icy kitchen linoleum.

She studies, peels potatoes, goes for firewood with Lewis, sometimes plays three-handed whist with him and Lillian. Says nothing.

Two or three times a week she talks to Dorothy in the outhouse at night. Dorothy is lonely; each time she talks longer and longer. At first Callie is afraid Lewis or Lillian will catch them together, then decides she doesn't care. Lillian can't get any madder than she is already. Nothing has been said about the things in her diary since the day her mother threw it at her, but she can tell by the set of Lillian's mouth that she won't ever forget.

Lillian and Lewis don't know Dorothy is all by herself, or Lillian might go visit her in spite of what Lewis said. It's so sad that sisters won't talk to each other just because they think they should be loyal to their husbands.

If she ever gets married, she isn't going to let her husband order her around. But she can understand why Lillian is afraid of Lewis losing his temper.

One morning Lewis calls her to look at the thermometer. It's sixty below zero, ninety-two degrees below the freezing mark. In the light of the rising sun, the air sparkles with tiny ice crystals, like a bright, thin fog.

"You'd better help me with the animals," Lewis says. "Tie a scarf across your face or you'll frost your lungs."

She's done that, frosted her lungs and her cheekbones and the ends of her fingers. It didn't hurt; she just felt numb. It was only later, when she was indoors, that the tingle of thawing flesh built to searing pain.

They carry buckets of hot water to the barn instead of driving the animals to the top spring barrel. Breathing is difficult but it doesn't feel much colder than forty below, except for the air biting at her eyes. Imagine if there was a wind blowing! Hard to believe that the animals generate enough body heat to keep warm inside the barn, but they do. Well, maybe not warm, but they're not freezing.

Martha, curled up on Dinah's broad back, stretches and leaps to the manger, then the

floor, to wait for her portion of milk. She rubs against Callie's legs and purrs. She doesn't seem to miss the kittens. Does she even remember she had them? Maybe animals are lucky, maybe they don't remember things.

On the way back to the house she picks up an armload of wood to take inside. It's hard not to think about fire in this weather. They need it to keep warm and alive, but if the house caught fire, they probably wouldn't get out with enough clothes. They might manage for a day or two in the barn with the animals, but it's unlikely anybody would see the smoke and rescue them. Then they'd freeze to death.

Callie McKenzie, wearing only pajamas and a parka, and with nothing on her feet, walks seven miles in forty below weather to the neighbors for help.

She might make it to Mr. Sutherland's, but she'd have frozen feet. She chucks another log in the airtight and puts her hand near the chimney to check the heat. Could she get out of the window in her room if she had to? Given a choice, she'd rather freeze than burn.

By evening, it's warmed up to forty below zero. Around nine o'clock, she puts on parka, mitts and boots and goes to the outhouse. As she's about to leave, footsteps crunch in the snow outside and Dorothy says, "Come and see the shooting stars."

She joins Dorothy behind the outhouse. The stars and moon are brilliant. Every few seconds, a star flames across the inky blue sky and disappears behind the pasture hill. She wishes Peter could be here; he'd love this.

"What makes them do that?"

"They're meteors. I suppose they might come from the tail of a comet."

That doesn't explain why, but it's not important. The falling stars are marvelous. Even without them, the night would be beautiful. Moon and star light reflect off the snow and it seems almost bright enough to read. She could go for a walk and watch for mysterious shapes scurrying through the shadows — rabbits, mice, a fox, or coyote.

The eerie light calls to her, like those other clear nights when the luminous green, red, violet, and yellow of the northern lights shimmer and shift across the sky. She yearns to answer the call, to drift into the mysterious beauty of the landscape and let it flood through her mind, erasing everything else.

Dorothy shivers. "I'm going in. Don't stay out here too long; you'll catch your death." Her boots creak on the dry snow and the outhouse door closes behind her.

Callie's feet urge her to climb the pasture hill or go down to the creek and wander among the brittle frozen willows, to lose herself in the mystery of the night. She takes a step toward the creek. And stops. After a moment she goes back to the house.

A week later another chinook blows in from the southwest and overnight the temperature rises to thirty above. That's still two degrees below freezing, but it feels like summer. Lillian frowns when Callie says she wants to put the bridle on Silver and go riding.

"Why not?" Lewis asks. "She's up to date with her schoolwork."

Does Lillian think she's going to meet Kjell in the bush some place and roll around in a snowbank with him? They still don't know he's gone. Or that Callie takes Dorothy's letters to the post office and picks up her mail and hides it inside her parka until she can pass it on. Kjell's got a good job in Medicine Hat and Dorothy is looking forward to

spring when she and Dag will join him there. Lillian and Lewis don't know anything about what's going on and it serves them right.

Silver is not pleased about the bridle and shakes her head as she mouths the bit. She's not pleased about carrying Callie around in the snow either. The warmer air has made it soft and heavy, hard going for a horse that's been lazing around the barn for months.

Callie forces her halfway to the top of the pasture hill. "Now you have to do what I want, don't you?" She holds power in her hands, leather reins attached to the bit in Silver's mouth. It feels good to be in control but slogging around in wet snow isn't much fun. She turns the mare toward the barn and lets her pick her own way.

That evening she's in the outhouse, zipping up her pants, when she realizes that she walked through the dark without once thinking about monsters. She grins and stretches her hands high above her head. It's like being in a sky dream, floating free above the earth.

When she steps outside, the old fear rushes back, squeezing air from her lungs, making her knees quake. She blows out the lantern and forces herself to breathe deeply, to stand still until her eyes become used to the dark and she can see vague shapes around her. Slowly she circles the outhouse. There are no monsters. Only Jake bounding to meet her. She scratches his ears and lets out a long quivering breath. The earth doesn't change when night comes; it's just that the sun goes away for a few hours.

The chinook pushes the temperature above freezing for a few days and more snow melts away. Then the mild breeze from the coast dies away and the mercury drifts down to twenty and stays there.

"It's going to snow." Lewis puts his coffee mug down and gazes at the clouds rolling in over the pasture hill. "Bound to, with this warm weather."

He's right. During dinner big, fragile flakes float down, silent and unhurried, covering the old rutted snow. By the time she's drying dishes, the flakes are so thick and heavy she can barely see the wood pile.

"I'm going for a walk."

Lillian gives her a long look, then bangs the dishpan back onto its nail in the shed. "Nobody with any sense would walk in a storm."

"There's no wind and it's not cold."

"Well, don't wander too far. Your father will be fit to be tied if he has to go looking for you."

Lillian must think Kjell is too smart to go out in a storm. Maybe she hopes Callie really will get lost.

She pulls on moccasins and rubbers, hurries into her parka and steps outside into a world of swirling white.

It's magic, warm and mellow. She tilts her head back to feel the flakes' cold kisses on her face, then walks around the yard, watching the snow settle on the wood pile, the tractor, the willows along the spring. Beside the workshop, she turns to look at the houses. Only a hundred yards away, they're vague square shapes made mysterious by the veil of falling flakes.

The white-misted muted world around her is an almost perfect dream, yet she aches

for more, longs for it to wipe out the present and let her into the future. She wants to walk through the dancing flakes into a new world and keep on walking until she becomes so much a part of it that nothing else remains.

She moves toward the road, the square shapes becoming houses again. She passes between them, heading across the road and down toward the bridge, and they're lost behind the kaleidoscope of shimmering snow. The frozen ruts made by the horses and heavy wood-laden sleigh are still easy to follow but all she can see is the trail, snow-brushed bushes beside it, and white, white, white all around as the ruts lead her to Herron Creek. It is a new world, empty of people, and all of it belongs to her.

She climbs down to the frozen creek and bends to move beneath the shelter of the bridge. A short length of log lies in the dead brown grass on the bank. She drags it to the ice and sits down. It's like being safe in a cave with the fleecy snow to keep her warm. She'll stay here for a while, imagining that she is a fox or a mouse, able to live in this world forever. The shining snow fills her mind.

Lillian walks toward her, and the cave becomes dark and airless. Lillian is going to bury her here, fill the openings with rock and leave her to scrabble helplessly against ice and stone and darkness, her words and thoughts dying the moment they're born. Soon she will be too weak to struggle. She will shrink, like December days, into a narrow dead space bounded by heavy darkness, able to do nothing but sit and wait for a spring that will never come.

Gasping for air, she rushes into the bright eddying snow. Fury at Lillian's invasion sears her lungs.

She picks up a dead branch, flinging it at the tangle of willows beside her. Heavy clumps of snow fall on her head and shoulders, on her upturned face.

Spring is so far away. But it will come.

She brushes the snow off and raises her face to the whirling flakes. They catch on her eyelashes, and she sticks her tongue out to taste them. It's only snow and snow melts, not like Lillian's words that stick like brittle, burning thorns.

She'll lock Lillian away in a cell in a dark corner of her mind. Do the same to Lillian and her thorns as Lillian wants to do to her. Callie turns the cold metal key, hears the bolt click home.

Now there is only a world filled with snow and silence where her mind and body can range freely, playing with the white light and whirling flakes. She will go across the trackless field to its western boundary, safe in this world of tender caressing snow.

Her footsteps turn toward the wide field, and she walks where no one has walked before or will again. Elation sings in her blood. If she can't find her way back, perhaps she'll find a way to somewhere else.

The snow rides the wind now, eddying in small swirls against her face. The light becomes brighter, bathing her in a brilliant white glow, then the sun shines through, sparking the tumbling snow into tiny points of light. The storm is passing, will soon be over. Seconds later, the sun is gone, and the snow falls thicker than ever. She walks on, leaning into the wind, letting the snow beat against her face.

Chapter Thirty

Callie's in the attic, looking through old magazines for information to use in an English essay and listening to Dinah Shore sing *Buttons and Bows* on the radio downstairs, when she hears the rumble of a truck engine. She hurries to the window; this is the first vehicle on the road since last fall. The big truck lunges over ruts of mud and ice and stops at the gate. She's not surprised to see Kjell get out to open it, then back the truck alongside his house; she's known for a month that he was coming to get Dorothy the first week of April.

Seeing him makes her feel uncomfortable. He seems like a stranger now, not the friend she'd played crib with before the touching started. He'd told her she was smart and talked to her like a grownup. But she can't help thinking his talk about wanting to be her father was just a trick he pulled so he could get to touch her. Not likely she'll ever find out, though.

Lewis comes in from the shop and the sound of his and Lillian's voices rise through the space around the chimney.

"The bastard's finally shown his face," Lewis says. "He must have walked out and hitched a ride to town to get that truck."

They don't know Kjell has been gone for months. Now they never will. She doesn't have to tell what she knows.

Lillian says, "I suppose they'll pack up and go now."

"Good riddance!" Lewis stomps around the kitchen. "He'd better get rid of that house, or I'll burn it down."

"Oh, Lewis, you can't do that."

"I can, by God. It's my land and anything sitting on it belongs to me by rights."

Early next morning, wakened by truck and pickup motors purring in the yard, she can't resist getting out of bed and dashing up to the attic to wave goodbye.

Dorothy doesn't even glance at the attic window. She hurries toward Callie's back door with something in her hand. Callie rushes down the stairs and out to the shed. Tucked between the door and the frame are two letters.

"Callie, you get back in here!" Lillian hurries through the kitchen.

She tucks the letter addressed to her in the pocket of her pajama top and hands Lillian the other one. Lillian gives her a suspicious glance. Callie stiffens, hoping her mother hasn't noticed the bulge in her pocket. The roar of the engines fades, and she glances out the shed window in time to see the trucks go down the road.

Lillian hands the letter to Lewis. "I guess they're gone," she says. Her voice sounds shaky.

Lewis rips open the envelope and reads the note. "He says they're moving back to Medicine Hat and his land is up for sale."

"What about the house?" Lillian lights the kitchen fire and fills the coffee pot.

"Sold it to somebody named Grant. He's supposed to haul the house away when the roads are in better shape."

"Well, I guess that's that," Lillian says. She swings around to glare at Callie. "Get your clothes on and wash your face. I want some work done around here today."

Lillian storms into housework after breakfast, her face a thunder cloud, and Callie is

set to trimming lamp wicks and polishing the globes with crumpled newspaper. It's noon before she gets to the outhouse and opens her letter.

Dear Callie

Your Aunt Dorothy and I are headed for Medicine Hat. I've got a good job and Dorothy will likely go back to teaching in the fall. Dag is real happy about it, and I guess so are we. Too bad your Dad and I couldn't hit it off but that's the way things go.

I'll miss talking to you and playing crib. You're damn near as good as I am, ha ha!

I hope you have a good life. You're real smart. I know you'll do well. Don't forget all the things I told you.

Your Uncle Kjell

She can't help liking his words. Even if he did trick her last year and she fell for it like a stupid little kid, he's written her a proper letter, as if she were a grownup.

When Lillian goes down to the chicken house, Callie takes out the fat, blue leather-bound volume of the *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, a gift from Peter two years ago. She hides the letter at the beginning of *Macbeth*.

April is a restless month. On warm days the water rushes down the gullies and the creek rises, but other days have chill winds and the odd snow flurry. Lewis paces, worrying already about planting wheat. On bright days, when she's caught up with her lessons, Callie wanders the hills with Jake or rides Silver down the valley to the lake. A yearning impels her to be on the move, looking for something she can't name. The flowers she finds are the same as those she found last year but she's no closer to knowing for sure what they are. She begins to range into the next valley and the next after that, catching hell from Lillian when she's too late home to peel potatoes for supper.

She's begun a new story with herself as the heroine. *Cathleen walks into the snowstorm, the swirling curtain of flakes dark and mysterious. Suddenly the curtain parts and she looks out on a new world.* She isn't sure what this new world looks like, only that it will have many plants and she will be able to name all of them.

One gray day, she goes into Kjell's house and looks at the empty rooms. The house feels damp and forlorn, though it's easy to remember the days when it was full of life, people, and teasing arguments over cards. It's sad that those days are over, but she doesn't want them back. When Mr. Grant comes with men and machinery to haul the blue house away, she's glad to see it go.

On the first of May, Lewis and Lillian take the truck to Millburn for supplies, leaving her alone for the first time since fall. She checks the airtight and the kitchen stove. Not that it's cold; the thermometer reads forty-five degrees Fahrenheit. But if they come home to find the fires out, it'll give Lillian another excuse to yell at her.

It's a good time to reread Kjell's letter, as she has a dozen times already, searching for some clue that might straighten out her feelings. The cards and teasing had been fun. The touching had felt good. But scary, too. And she's almost sure he lied to her, made a fool of her. She takes *Shakespeare* from the small bookcase, sits on her cot, and opens the book to *Macbeth*.

The letter isn't there.

But it *must* be there! She looks in the pages on both sides, then riffles all the pages.

The book falls open to *The Merchant of Venice*, where she'd put the ribbon marker to remind her what play she intended to read next. Kjell's letter lies next to the ribbon.

But that's not where she'd put it.

Lillian read her letter! Lillian pawed through her private things again!

Book and letter fall to the floor as she jerks to her feet. She can see Lillian reading Kjell's letter, her greedy eyes soiling his words, storing them away as ammunition. Lillian's face is triumphant, waiting for the right moment to hurl her scorn and wrath, like a hailstorm focusing on one small buttercup. Darkness fills her mind, erases the world around her, leaves her spiraling downward into a vortex of flames.

When the blackness clears, she's in the kitchen, holding the butcher knife. She will shove it into Lillian's heart. Silence that voice forever.

Stunned, Callie stares at the narrow blade and worn black handle. It clatters to the floor. Her heart pounds, her breath is harsh as a winter wind. The fire inside demands release. The back door slams behind her as she races to the barn. She puts the bridle on Silver and jumps on her back straight from the ground.

Silver at a full gallop, Callie bends low over the mare's neck, clinging to the mane, squeezing with her knees. Down the road, the horse's power flowing beneath her, past the end of the farm, past the bare hills beyond it, around the curve to the right. Away from Millburn, away from Lillian. Four miles from home Silver stumbles and goes down on one knee. Callie slides over her head and lands with a bone-jarring thud on the ground.

It takes a moment to realize where she is, what she's doing. When she stands up and takes a tentative step, she notices Silver laboring for breath. Callie picks up the reins and rubs the mare's neck. She's an old horse. Not fair to make her pay for what Lillian's done.

Anyway, she has to go back to the farm. She can't run away without clothes and money. She mounts Silver and turns her around. The mare breaks into a trot and Callie hauls on the reins, slows her to a walk.

By the time they're home, the sweat on Silver's flanks has dried and her breathing is normal. Callie lets her have a short drink at the upper spring barrel and puts her back in the stall. She'll have to give Silver a good going over with the currycomb, but not now.

Callie walks to the house, Jake bouncing at her feet, pleased to have someone home again. Her legs are shaking and she's cold, inside and out.

She stokes the fires and tosses Kjell's letter into the airtight. She doesn't want to read the letter again, now that Lillian's touched it.

What if her parents had been home this afternoon? Would she have used that butcher knife on her mother?

The red flames of anger that burn around Lillian's head, that drive Lewis to strike out, burn in her, too. She is more afraid of them than she has ever been of anything. Perhaps, after all, fire is the most powerful of the four elements. Surely it's the most destructive.

She doesn't want to kill anyone. Not even Lillian. It's true Lillian doesn't love her, but she doesn't love Lillian either.

When she puts the kettle on for tea, it occurs to her that a cigarette would taste good. Well, not good exactly, but it's what she feels like doing, it's the kind of taste she wants. She goes to the barn and retrieves Kjell's cigarette papers from a crack behind the manger in the unused stall.

She's halfway out the door when she remembers her first fairy tale is hidden in the loft. She climbs the ladder and takes the oilcloth-wrapped package from the far corner.

No more hiding. No more pretending. If Lillian finds it and insists on reading it, so what? She'd better not try burning it, though.

In the house, the kettle is boiling. While the tea steeps, she puts the story away in her closet and manages to roll a cigarette using Lewis's Ogden Fine Cut.

She sits at the kitchen table, in Lewis's place, and lights the cigarette. The match flame looks angry, like the terrifying fire she sees so often around Lillian's head.

She lights another match and, as she leans forward to stare at it, the end of her braid swings into the flame. She jerks back, the smell of burning hair strong in her nostrils. The memory comes back.

She is four. Lewis, Lillian, and Peter are shouting at each other in the front room at Poplar Ridge. The swearing and yelling goes on and on and on, beating around her head. Lewis hits Peter in the jaw and Peter stumbles back. He clutches at the table for support and a dish of pickled beets crashes to the floor, the red brine like blood at a pig-killing, splashing red over his boots.

She runs to her mother, screaming in terror, clings to Lillian's stocking-clad legs with both hands, tries to bury her head in her mother's dress to hide from the storm.

Lillian pries Callie's hands loose and pushes her away. She stumbles and falls, picks herself up. Lillian grabs some papers out of Peter's hands and throws them in the airtight heater.

"You're not going to enlist!" Lillian shouts. "You're too young. Russell joined up and that's enough."

Behind Lillian, the flames leap up from the open heater, higher and higher, crackling like angry voices, framing Lillian's face. Her hair catches on fire.

"Jesus Christ, woman!" Lewis slams the heater lid down, smothers her smoldering curls in a tea towel.

Callie crouches in the doorway, too frightened to move, too alone to stop screaming.

She's hunched over her teacup, muscles tense. Her temper is as bad as Lillian's. And Lewis's. She wishes it were not so.

Lewis has to live with Lillian, but she doesn't. Never again will she let Lillian's shouting and flames terrorize her. Nor will she put up with Lillian reading her letters or telling her what to do or meddling with her thoughts and feelings. What she will do is lock Lillian into that dark cell in the back of her mind, turn the key and walk away.

She butts the cigarette and dumps the ashes in the kitchen stove. She doesn't care if Lewis and Lillian know she smokes, but Lillian will use the same argument she used with Peter and Russell. *"If you're going to smoke, you have to earn money to buy cigarettes. There are no free rides around here."* Fair enough. If she can get a part time job when she goes to school, she'll smoke as much as she likes.

In the attic, she searches for Russell's old duffel bag. Half an hour later she carries it, packed with clothes and books and the fairy story, to the barn loft. If her plan doesn't work, then she'll be ready to leave.

Lillian will come back soon, take off her coat and hat and gloves, shake up the fire in the kitchen stove. She will talk to Lewis about whoever they saw in Millburn, about the scandalous price of beef or bacon. She'll order Callie to bring in wood and peel potatoes.

But she won't know that her poking and prying have been discovered. She won't know Callie has given up being a daughter. She won't know where the battle lines are drawn.

Callie sits at her table and uncaps her pen to write a letter, holding the power of knowledge in her mind. The flames of her anger are as still and rigid as an icicle. She must make sure the anger stays frozen, that it doesn't melt and flare out to hurt people like Lillian's does, like Lewis's has.

She begins to write, to build a fire break.

Chapter Thirty-One

Three weeks pass, the sun growing warm, the grass green and juicy. Callie says little. The icicle of anger inside her is still frozen solid. She works at her assignments every moment she can, even late into the evening.

Lillian bakes a chocolate cake for her thirteenth birthday and makes a silly comment about her becoming a frivolous teenager.

Callie smiles politely, thanks her for the cake and the new shirt and goes back to her books.

Being thirteen doesn't seem to matter much. She feels years older than she did on her last birthday. Old enough to do what she has to, anyway.

She stayed home the last time Lewis went to Millburn, saying she had to catch up on her schoolwork. He seemed surprised but didn't argue. Which is good; she can't tell him she's trying to finish the year's work ahead of time in case she has to leave. A week after her birthday, he takes Lillian to get groceries and mail.

They come back late. Lillian bustles into the kitchen, Lewis behind her with a box of groceries, and tosses the mail on the table. "There are two letters for you."

The first is from the Peace District Cooperative Association. She pulls out the letter. Stapled to it is a check for twenty-five dollars. The thrill is faint, like a far-off echo. She hands the letter to Lillian.

"What's this all about?"

"I entered an essay contest about cooperatives. I won first prize."

"Well! I didn't know you had it in you."

There are a lot of things Lillian doesn't know.

"I told you, socialism is bullshit!" Anger is brewing in Lewis's eyes. "Why did you write that?"

"For the money."

He stares at her for a moment, then starts to laugh. She hasn't heard him laugh since well before Christmas.

Lillian says, "Shall I keep the check for you?"

"No, I'll cash it next time we go to Fort St. John."

"That's a lot of money. You'd better buy a Toni so I can give you a permanent. And some proper dresses."

The microscope appears in her mind and evaporates. No. She might need the money for food, a place to stay.

Lillian shoves the other letter at her. "Why is the Fort St. John School Board writing to you?"

The old fear immobilizes her. Her stomach knots and her knees go rubbery.

Lillian waits, eyes cold and suspicious.

Lewis says, "Is there any tea?"

Callie opens the letter while Lillian fills the kettle. With the form she asked for, the form that must be signed by Lewis and Lillian so she can live in the school dormitory for country kids, is a page called Instructions to Parents. She hands them to Lillian in silence. She'll save her words until the fight starts.

Lillian flings the papers on the table. "Did you write and ask for that form?"

"Yes."

"You're getting too big for your boots, my girl." Lillian's face is flushed. "You're not going to school in town until you've learned some sense and the way you act, that will be never."

"I'll be in grade nine in September. I'll get better marks if I can ask the teachers questions and use books from the library. They'll have a microscope, too, so I can study plants." Her heart is thudding so hard she's surprised nobody seems to hear it. She leans against the wall beside the wash bench and folds her arms.

"The correspondence school sends you all the books you need. And collecting flowers is just a hobby."

"I want to read more books than just those. I'm going to university when I'm through high school."

"And who told you that, miss? We can't afford to send you to university."

"I'll work my way through, like Peter. And the flowers aren't a hobby; I'm going to be a botanist."

"Nonsense! Your job is to marry and have children."

Lillian won't give in if the argument is education. There's only one other possibility, a lie so big and black and terrible it's almost unimaginable.

But it might work; it's what Lillian wants herself. Callie swallows, the icicle inside colder than ever. Her skin ripples in a shiver that almost paralyzes her tongue.

"I hate the farm. I want to be in town where I can chum with girls. I want running water and inside toilets. I want to work after school for money and go to movies."

Her tongue feels shriveled, as though it's been seared in flames. Lewis stares at her, his mouth open, but his eyes aware. He knows she's lying; guesses how much it's costing her.

"What you want doesn't matter. You're not going."

"Why not?" Her heart speeds up.

"Because I say so!" Lillian's face is fiery red now. She pours water into the tea pot and slams the lid on.

"I want to know your reasons."

Lillian takes a step toward her. "Don't speak back to me! I've said you can't go. That's all you need to know."

"That's not good enough." Her hands are steady now.

For a moment Lillian stands still, her jaw slack. "I'll show you what's good enough, you insolent brat!"

Lewis says, "Now listen, you two, don't fight."

She's struggling for her life, and all he can say is 'don't fight'?

Lillian glances at Lewis, takes a step backward. "You're far too young to be away from home."

"Being home hasn't kept me safe, has it? You never told me what sex is about. Or that men might try to do something bad to me."

"There was no reason to tell you! You shouldn't have to know about things like that until you're married. And don't use that word in this house."

"What word?"

"You know what I mean! Sex."

"I didn't know Kjell touching me was wrong."

"You should have known without me having to say so. You're just a slut!"

There's no way out of this argument. Lillian will never admit she made a mistake.

"Well, whatever you think I am, I know one thing for sure. I'm going to school in town in September."

"You're not."

"You can't stop me."

Lillian's hands curl into fists. "You're an ignorant, ungrateful brat. You're going to stay home until I can knock some sense into you."

"If I'm ignorant it's because all you care about is housework. I want to learn about the world."

Lillian's face is so red it seems truly possible that it might burst into flame. "I'll tie you to your bed!"

The icicle begins to melt. "Don't try it."

Lewis gets up from the table. "That's enough. Callie, go do the barn chores. I want to talk to your mother."

In the barn, she puts her arms around Silver's neck and leans against her until the trembling stops. If Lillian says no, there's still the other plan. One way or another, she'll soon be going into a new country, a new world.

She moves away from the mare. Lewis wants her to do chores. All right, she can do that.

What's Lillian saying to Lewis? Callie climbs the ladder to the loft, tosses down oat sheaves and checks the duffel bag. If Lewis and Lillian decide she has to stay on the farm, she'll soon be walking with it on her shoulder toward Millburn some morning before dawn. The essay prize will buy a bus ticket to Vancouver.

Martha scoots up the ladder and Callie sits down to pet her for a few minutes.

"Are you going to find a tomcat and have more kittens?" She probably will. And Lewis will get rid of them. The pain of this knowledge is dull and distant. There's nothing she can do about it. The only one she can save is herself.

The thought of leaving the valley brings an ache to her throat so heavy it seems impossible to bear. But she can't stay. She can't come back and take over the farm either, not if Lillian lives here. Lillian won't change. Callie stares out at the farmyard. She's already in a new world. One where she makes her own decisions. One where she has to leave the land she loves so much.

She climbs down, cuts the twine on the sheaves, and fills the mangers. Grabs the manure fork from where it leans against the wall, cleans the floor, puts down fresh straw.

What's going on in the house? Will Lewis fight for her or back down if Lillian starts in at him about being a jailbird? If he fights and wins, she'll still have the summer to wander the valley. And the summers afterward, until she's finished school. The valley will still be home, even if the house isn't.

She takes a bucket to the spring and brings water to the chickens. They crowd around, cheeping and chattering, as she fills their food trough.

Maybe Lewis will talk Lillian around so there won't have to be any more fights.

And maybe he won't.

Whichever way it goes, she stood up for herself, she didn't back down once and didn't lose her temper. The lie is still sour in her mouth, but Lewis knows the truth.

It's time to go back to the house and find out what they've decided.

Lewis meets her mid-way to the house. He says, "Let's take a walk up to the top field and see how wet it is."

That probably means he wants to give Lillian time to put her everyday face back on.

At the top of the pasture hill, they each lean on a fence post and gaze at the black sod, speckled here and there with tufts of straw.

"It's just about dry enough to seed," Lewis says, "but we could get frost at night for a week or two yet."

She turns to look across the valley. Isn't he ever going to tell her what happened?

"You want a cigarette?"

Her head jerks around in surprise. He's holding out his tobacco pouch and Kjell's cigarette papers. She must have left the papers lying out in plain sight. His face is serious; he's not laughing at her. Her fingers awkward, she rolls a cigarette, and he lights it for her, striking the match with his thumb nail. The first drag makes her cough.

"You'll get the hang of it." He takes his pipe out of his overall pocket and lights up, too. "Your mother's agreed to sign the papers."

Relief washes through her. "That's great." She holds the cigarette the way Russell does and lets the smoke coil around her head. Lillian's right about one thing; you're as old as you feel. Maybe you're as big as you feel, too. Right now, she's eighteen and six feet tall.

"What were you going to do if she didn't?"

"Hitchhike to Russell's. Or take the bus to Vancouver to stay with Peter." She can unpack the duffel bag now. She's not going to hide that from Lillian either.

"Your mother's got funny ideas about some things but she's a good woman."

"You really think so?"

"I know so. But I don't blame you for wanting to leave. She's been rough on you." He relights his pipe. "You'll be all right. You're a smart kid."

Pride warms her cheeks. "Thanks."

"Russell and Rita will be there if you need anything."

She needs to get away for a little while. "Okay. I'm going for a walk. I'll be back soon."

He nods and heads on down the hill, the old felt hat tipped forward to shade his eyes from the sun. She'll miss him and Jake as much as they miss her. Lillian will miss her when it comes to work, but she'll have Lewis and their creaking bed. Considering how often it creaks, Lillian must like it, no matter what she says about decent women.

She walks back up the hill and gazes out over the valley. The sun is dropping into the clouds on the western horizon, bathing the new grass and pale burgeoning leaves with warm copper light.

In moments, the sun will sink behind the hills, spreading cloud fire across the sky. Dusk will settle into the valley, softening the hard edges of rock and ridge, and finally wrap the land in darkness.

In the clear eye of her mind, she sees starlight, hears the language of night: the rustle of mice in the grass, the swoop of a hunting owl's wings, the yipping of a coyote to signal the beginning of a long crooning wail at the moon. Cooling air brings pine scent and a

whiff of dry grass; she can taste the musky fragrance of the creek. She opens her eyes to light, to peach and pink and gold streaking the clouds in the west.

Sunset. It feels like a goodbye. But the light could just as well be sunrise, dawn cloud fire glowing over the valley, bringing it to life. Like the sounds of night, dawn colors and the shape of the valley are etched into the metal of her mind.

Epilogue - July 1970

The sun slips down into the west, gilding the green valley in warm light. Callie rises from the old wooden chair where she's been sitting all day, elbows resting on the windowsill. She walks to the other attic window, footfalls echoing in the empty room, and looks out at the northern hills, pleasure and bitterness pulling her in different directions.

The bitterness will fade, is fading now. Today's memories of Lillian's angry harshness failed to raise her own anger and resentment to familiar roaring flames. Will she ever be able to forgive Lillian? Perhaps not completely, but time and distance have let her understand Lillian's own bitterness and unrelenting conviction in the rightness of her actions.

Tomorrow she will fly back to the Arctic and rejoin her team of botanists, go on collecting plants from the beautiful, swift-blooming tundra. Return to the peaceful sweeping stretches of land and sky, to the mysteries of plants bursting with exuberant life in their brief summer hiatus. And rejoice, too, in her own wholehearted passions.

Should she keep the farm? Come back here when the project is done?

She leans out to look west. A peach and flame sunset echoes the cloud fire of twenty-two years ago, echoes the love she'd felt for the valley, for every flower, tree, and blade of grass. Those same plants still thrive here, under the same skies, scenting the air with their perfume — hers for the taking now that Lillian is gone.

The cloud fire fades to pale mauve and gray. The air is cooling and a mosquito hovers near the glass, seeking a way in. She remembers long-ago evenings, muscles aching after twelve-hour days of seeding, harvesting, clearing land. Life would be like that again. She'd grow wheat or barley or rape, every year. But doors need to be locked now, animals guarded.

Her department is planning a new project. More collecting in exotic locales, experimentation, challenges to knowledge and curiosity.

The idea that the farm would go to strangers tears at her as though her roots are being pulled out of the ground. But the valley she loved is gone forever and so is the child she used to be. There's no way of going back. Tonight, she'll tell Russell to sell the farm and split the proceeds among the three of them.

It's time to let go.

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Books by Lea Tassie

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover
Siamese Summers
Cat Under Cover
Cats & Crayons
Calico Cat Caper

Charger the Soldier
Charger the Weapon
Charger the God
The Missing Year
The Case of the Copycat Killer

Deception Bay
Deep Water
Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising
Red Blood Falling
Shockwave

A Clear Eye
Double Image
Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest
Walking the Windsong
Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail
Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?

About the Book

It's 1947 and twelve-year-old Callie lives on a primitive, isolated homestead in northern British Columbia. Her domineering mother, Lillian, insists that her daughter's sole purpose in life is to be a dutiful wife and mother, and her father, Lewis, a veteran haunted by his experience of World War One, refuses to interfere. Callie dreams of becoming a botanist, an ambition that combines her deep love of nature with her hunger for truth. Her innocence, fostered by isolation and her mother's determination to force Callie into the outdated mold of Lillian's own pre-WWI youth, is the fateful catalyst of a family feud that tests all of Callie's growing strength as she struggles for the freedom to be herself.

Author Bio

Lea Tassie grew up on an isolated homestead in northern British Columbia. Now she lives and writes in the beautiful, temperate, Pacific Coast rainforest. Her fiction includes cat humor, science fiction, and mainstream novels. Her non-fiction deals in a light-hearted way with the weird words and phrases found in the English language.